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AUTOBIOGRAPHY SHE WROTE: AGATHA CHRISTIE AND THE PROBLEM OF  
FEMALE AUTHORSHIP

A Thesis Presented

by

Jesse Marie Keel

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
Specializing in English

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Jinny Huh, Ph.D., Advisor  
Paul Deslandes, Ph.D., Chairperson  
Sarah Turner, Ph.D.  
Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

## **ABSTRACT**

Best known for being a best-selling author of mystery and detective fiction, little attention has been paid to the six non-mystery novels Agatha Christie wrote under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott. Moreover, other than in biographical studies, scant critical attention exists surrounding her autobiography. Taking these seven overlooked texts into consideration, this thesis seeks to build on current Christie scholarship by looking at Christie's commercially constructed authorial persona and looking at the ways in which the Mary Westmacott novels can be read as a form of alternative biography. By offering a close reading of both Christie's autobiography, the work of her main biographers, and each of the six novels, I will identify the larger feminist implications of Christie's relationship to, and portrayal of, the role that marriage and motherhood play in the 20<sup>th</sup> century British woman's life. The thesis will conclude with a consideration of Christie's traditional detective fiction through the lens of the Westmacott novels. Although my argument will remain unable to perform a full rehabilitation of Christie as a radical feminist, it will attempt to highlight the moments of feminist potential that are often overlooked by many Christie scholars as well as by modern portraits of the author.

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## CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION IS ANNOUNCED

“On second thought, autobiography is much too grand a word.”

-Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*

Martin West was almost the name of the world's bestselling author. Or it might have been Mostyn Grey if Christie had her choice and adopted a “manly and forthright” male pen name (*Autobiography* 269). But her publisher, John Lane, wagered that her given name would stick in the minds of readers. It is obvious now that, as Christie admits, “John Lane was right” (269). This initial tension over the gendered name of the authorial persona reveals the larger conflict that female authorship presented for Agatha Christie. Her idea that “a woman's name would prejudice people against [her] work” was not irrational for the time (269), only decades after a period during which female authors using male pseudonyms was occasionally a necessity.<sup>1</sup> However, beneath this idea lingers the lasting imprints of patriarchy's role in authorship and the ways that Christie struggled within it.

In the forward to her autobiography, dated April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1950, Agatha Christie sets up the writing of her autobiography as a whim, one that “overtakes everyone sooner or later” (xi). An indulgent dive into memory, not a “purposeful study of one's whole life” (xii). From the forward on, Christie takes a meandering path through her life, attempting chronology but slipping into a mode of expounding and commentary that bring the reader back to the present time of the narrator. However, for all her disclaimers, Christie's

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<sup>1</sup> Although using male pseudonyms was not required for women to be published, notable authors such as Charlotte Bronte who published under the name Currer Bell or Mary Ann Evans who published as George Eliot did adopt pen names to make their writing more marketable and judged seriously.

autobiography is cultivated with clear intent. With a mind towards the legacy she will leave behind, Christie is actively working to sculpt an image that is both mass marketable and noncontroversial, that will have both a timeless endurance as well as provide a shield for the private Christie. Although the subject of the biography is perhaps meant to appear to be Agatha herself, the narrator and portrait is always “Agatha Christie”, the author and public figure. Other Agathas make appearances, but they are all altered to fit the single identity that Christie uses this biography to shape.

More importantly, in the forward she establishes this critical caveat that will shape the feel of every detail and gap that is to follow – “I like living. I have sometimes been wildly despairing, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing” (xiii). It disclaims what she fears the world already might suspect about her life: that it has been a struggle that she almost lost. In this light, reading the autobiography becomes an act of reading what is not mentioned, a gap that I argue can be filled through not just reading her detective fiction, but also by paying special attention to her six non-detective novels.

Published ten years after her first novel, Christie eventually did write a novel under a pseudonym, but not a male one. Mary Westmacott, a name comprised of her middle name and a distant family name, became the (temporary) anonymous pen name under which Christie wrote six novels. Born out of a desire “to write something other than a detective story” (456), Christie gives them little attention in her autobiography. Written off as merely autobiographical, little critical consideration has been cast upon these six novels. They have been regarded as fodder for biographers not serious literary critics. Although each novel varies from the other in terms of subject and narrator, length,

and style, each of the six closely revolve around a similar pairing of issues for women: marriage and motherhood.<sup>2</sup> Although the first two she wrote, *Giant's Bread* (1930) and *Unfinished Portrait* (1934), borrow from her life most closely, it is *Absent in the Spring* (1944) that she calls “the one book that has satisfied me completely” (484). Despite the pleasure, satisfaction, and relative success provided by each of these six novels, Christie notes that her publishers “hated Mary Westmacott writing anything” (487). Of course, her publishers hated anything that competed with the money factory that was Christie’s detective fiction, but this comment also exposes more important questions about the marketability of women’s stories and how they fit into the authorial persona Christie had created.

Most scholarship has treated the Westmacott novels as useful for insight into identity and biography but not key points of literary discovery. At their heart, I might say that the Westmacott novels suffer from a genre identity crisis. Termed as “straight” novels by Christie in an effort to distinguish them from the genre conventions of her detective and mystery fiction, others have called them everything from romance to non-mystery novels. And yet all of these attempts at categorization fail to encapsulate the brilliant breadth of the works. What all scholars and biographers agree on, however dismissively, is that they are largely autobiographical. Yet, it is the very autobiographical nature that I would argue makes the Westmacott novels the richest source of potential within Christie scholarship. In them she is unburdened from the expectations of her carefully constructed autobiography and is able to freely explore her own identity in ways

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<sup>2</sup> For a brief summary of each Christie novel discussed in this project, please see the attached annotated bibliography.

that were otherwise unspeakable. Therefore, I will argue that the Mary Westmacott novels make up an alternative form of autobiography, one that, while filling in the gaps, reveals the strength of Christie's feminism and her struggle with her identity as a female author.

### **Historical Context**

In both instances, the autobiographical impulse and the struggles that it presented for Christie are highly intertwined with the social issues of her historical period. In order to understand Christie and her writing we must first understand the context in which she wrote. Born at the end of the Victorian era and writing through both World Wars, Christie's long life and career stretch through a period of rapid change for the world at large and for women in particular. Despite growing up during the period of time in which "prewar British feminists regarded their movement as an attack on separate sphere ideology and its constructions of masculinity and femininity" as well as the enfranchisement of women (Kent 5), Christie's autobiography consistently upholds the Victorian notions of femininity that her mother and her upper-class family represented to her.

In terms of the forms of identity this thesis concerns itself with, marriage and motherhood, Christie's attitude was greatly shaped by her Victorian upbringing. As explored by Stephanie Coontz in her book *Marriage, a History*, Victorian marriage was shaped by the growing sentimentalization of married love in which marriage was "the pivotal experience in people's lives and married love the principal focus of their emotions" (Coontz 177). Of course, as Coontz points out "the biggest single obstacle to



making personal happiness the foremost goal of marriage was that women needed to marry in order to survive” (185). This tension is both represented by the marriage of Christie’s parents, Clara and Fred Miller, as well as her own marriages. Christie spends multiple occasions describing the love within her parents’ marriage; however, it is also clear that her mother, as the daughter of a widow, who grew up dependent on wealthy relations, understood the importance of marrying to secure her future safety. And while Fred did not prove to be the most reliable provider for his family, Clara and Christie were always able to live in a relative degree of comfort.

Given this privileged upbringing and despite moments of financial insecurity, Christie ignored any sort of future financial worries in favor of her love for Archie, her first husband. Of course, this choice of relationship fits the increasingly growing trend of companionate marriage, a more sentimental approach to the institution that emphasized love and companionship as key features in a relationship. However, although Christie married Archie in pursuit of this ideal type of companionate marriage, it does not mean that she experienced it. Nevertheless, within the upper-middle class, Christie’s marriage still adhered to a strict separation of spheres which “made it hard for couples to share their innermost dreams, no matter how much in love they were” (Coontz 188). Therefore, while Christie stayed home to keep house and Archie worked, their lives and interests remained separate and disappointing.

Although it is hard to say with any certainty the reasons behind their divorce, it does appear to fit the growing trend during that time in which “increasingly, people filed for divorce because their marriages did not provide love, companionship, and emotional intimacy, rather than because their partners were cruel or had failed to perform their

marital roles as housekeeper or provider” ( Coontz 202). At the same time, “pressure for couples to put marriage first and foremost in their lives led many women to become more dependent on their relationships with men” (Coontz 205) and this is clearly true in Christie’s case. Of course, growing up marriage was understood as part of her future, but it was also framed as the most critical and life shaping choice that Christie was ever going to be allowed to make for herself and therefore, when her first marriage ended, Christie entered a period of great crisis. Her second marriage, however, successfully achieved a companionate marriage in which Max and Christie had an established friendship before they got married.

Just as important as how she was raised is the effect war had on Christie’s life. Besides accelerating her engagement and marriage to Archie, the onset of the First World War shaped Christie’s entry into married life and working life. After her marriage she continued to live at home with her mother while Archie was away. Although she did not need to take on the factory work or seek employment in the way that many other women did, Christie worked for the Volunteer Aid Detachment in her local hospital. Her work as a nurse at a dispensary shaped the knowledge that she would later use in her novels and gave her the inspiration and time to write her first book. Of course, as soon as the war ended and Archie returned, Christie stopped working and transitioned abruptly into life as a married woman who spent her time taking care of the home, a reality she found lonely and unfulfilling (*Autobiography* 250).

What both Susan Grayzel and Susan Kent’s studies of the historical renegotiations of gender and feminism that took place before and after World War I expose is that “the war, from its outset paradoxically both expanded the range of possibilities for women and

curtailed them” (Grayzel 3). This paradox can be extended to characterize the Second World War as well. By the time the next war came, Christie was remarried and making her own money as a celebrated author. Although she did once again work in hospitals, Christie and many of the other women who had been young during the first war were not as needed during the second one. Once again, life changed for Christie and for other women after the war. Unlike at the end of the First World War, after the Second World War many women were able to retain their jobs. Although, in many cases, they were once again restricted to jobs perceived as feminine and mothers were still discouraged from working (Braybon 262, 279). However, there were still many efforts to enact a return to normalcy and represent traditional British values that Christie embraced. It is within this paradox that we can understand the tension within Christie’s own understanding of her role as both a woman of the British Empire and as a world-famous author. Despite her professional success as a nurse during the first war and as a novelist following the war, Christie’s autobiography negotiates these professional identities in terms of conservative forms of feminine duty. At the same time, the Westmacott novels reveal her conceptualization of these roles of mother and wife and caretaker as being much more complex.

### **Current Scholarship**

As the “Queen of Crime” Agatha Christie is best known for, and most studied for, the brilliance of her detective fiction. Characterized by her mastery of the puzzle form and the locked room mystery, Christie’s writing has consistently been read within the context of the Golden Age detective fiction. Even in this context, Christie has received

relatively limited critical attention - easily written off as popular or middlebrow fiction then and now. It was not until 2016 that the first edited collection of essays by an academic publisher was produced. In the introduction to this first collection, *The Ageless Agatha Christie*, editor J.C. Bernthal notes the sense of self-deprecation that often characterizes the scholarly work around Christie. However, in recent years there has been a shift in the scholarship that has reinvigorated the field. These new interpretations, like my own, focalize Christie's historical context and how our image of the author herself can change based on the ways we choose to read her books – constantly complicating what used to be a very neat symbol for a type of conservative British womanhood.

For the purposes of this work, the most important new developments in the field have come from the aforementioned J.C. Bernthal and Merja Makinen. Going back to 2006, Makinen's work on Christie and gender is foundational to my ability to push towards this interpretation of Christie's feminist potential. Although she is not the only scholar to engage in "feminist attempts at recuperation of Christie," she is one of the first to use more than just a handful of examples to make generalizations (Makinen 1). Her argument builds upon the foundational idea that "Christie was writing during a period of intense gender renegotiation" and that "conservatism did not necessarily rule out a questioning and even subversive attitude to cultural gender expectations" (Makinen 1). Because of this textual focus, Makinen does make more use of the Westmacott novels than other scholars; however, their inclusion and emphasis is still relatively minor, but understandable in her larger pursuit of surveying a greater range of Christie's lengthy bibliography.

Returning to the more recent work of Bernthal, his book *Queering Agatha Christie* begins with a consideration of Agatha Christie as a construct. He is the first to suggest that we can consider “Christie’s conservative and conventional image as one she deliberately crafted for herself” in order to protect her more private identity and remain palatable to the general public, which for Bernthal is critical to the foundation of any queer reading of Christie (26). Bernthal’s argument looks at the queer potential present in the playful and subversive ways Christie treats and portrays gender identity and the ways in which “the texts can be read as spaces in which presumptions about human identity are exposed, undermined and renegotiated” (2). He not only forwards his argument as a critical milestone in the growing field of queer theory, but also as a study of Christie that “draws attention towards the artificial nature of the taxonomized identity itself,” and he devotes his entire first chapter to understanding the reality of Christie as a constructed self (3). Moreover, Bernthal highlights the impact Christie made within a traditionally male genre; as well, he works to elucidate the impact of “Christie’s strategic deployment of an authorial persona” (27). It is this sense of construction and how it interacts with the pseudonym of Mary Westmacott with which my argument concerns itself.

Although it is not a book length study, I find it critical to mention the 2011 article “A Hidden Body in the Library: Mary Westmacott, Agatha Christie, and Emotional Violence” by Sarah Whitney. As one of the only journal articles that centers around the Mary Westmacott novels, Whitney’s readings of the texts are a critical gesture at the direction this thesis seeks to push Christie scholarship. By reading the Westmacott novels as places in which “Christie argues that we take emotional violence...as seriously as we do the ‘body in the library’,” Whitney argues we are able to complicate our

understanding of Christie and her detective fiction (37). By understanding the Westmacott novels as forms of detective fiction in their own right and as representative of certain key themes such as self-knowledge and postwar trauma, Whitney argues for treating the Westmacott novels and the detective fiction as possessing “a particular kind of harmony that all readers of Christie should appreciate” (48). In this way, my argument continues the work begun by Whitney in this article and further looks at the revelations that can be gained about both Christie’s fiction and her life through a careful consideration of the Westmacott novels.

Finally, returning once again to Bernthal, in a nod to one of the most recent publications in Christie scholarship, the historical foundation that guides the essay collection that he edited with Rebecca Mills, *Agatha Christie Goes to War*, highlights not only the importance of reading Christie in her historical context, but also gives special attention to the ways in which “the trajectory and environmental and psychological textures of Christie’s fiction, plays and life writing show a negation of the legacy of war” (3). Of course, the essays go on to focus and solely consider the way war is written into her detective fiction despite the many ways war is at the heart of the Mary Westmacott novels. Taken together, these recent interventions in the field have provided the scaffolding onto which I can fully realize the potential that the Westmacott novels represent.

### **Theorizing Christie**

This potential to understand and investigate the gaps between Christie’s official record and the novels she wrote relies on larger questions presented in studies of

women's writing and autobiography. Reading this tension within the framework elucidated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* in which they argue "the female artist must first struggle against the effects of a socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd," I highlight the "revisionary struggle" of Christie as located within the gap between her autobiography and her fiction (49). Her refusal to write in depth about her divorce, her disappearance, and her views on motherhood thus stand in stark relief when held against the re-definition with which the Westmacott novels wrestle. It is the very traumatic and personal nature of these experiences and the way they threaten the moral stability of her traditional persona that I see as creating space for inquiry into the feminist potential within these radical texts.

In this way, the autobiographical nature of the Westmacott novels becomes their critical feature rather than their failure. Although the genre itself proports a façade of veracity and depiction of reality, it is also, at some level, always a work of fiction. Therefore, while her official autobiography works to cement her public image as one of a good conservative woman, consideration of an alternative form of autobiography highlights Christie's own struggle with the history of women's authorship of both fiction and their own stories. Thus, we can understand both works of writing to be equally true and un-true. Using the characteristics identified by Estelle Jelinek in her introduction to *Women's Autobiography*, we can easily read Christie's autobiography as part of a lineage of women's autobiography whose "intention is often powered by the motive to convince readers of their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self-image" (15).

Moreover, it is within this definitional intention that the need for Christie to protect that self-image through the Mary Westmacott pseudonym becomes obvious.

Christie's autobiography itself, like a great deal of women's autobiography, has also been overlooked as a source of literary critique within the scholarship of autobiography, a field that has to be constantly extricated from and understood in context of the historical maleness of the genre and the theory around the genre.<sup>3</sup> Reading Christie's work in this manner follows in the trajectory of studies of women's autobiography that seeks to expose the "myth of autobiographical storytelling as self-expressive of an autonomous individualism" (Smith 114). As Sidonie Smith demonstrates, women's autobiography is a performative act signaling "the making and unmaking of identities" (114). Therefore, more than just seeking to raise up the status and treatment of the Westmacott novels, this thesis seeks to offer critical consideration to Christie's official autobiography as well.

Moreover, in the places in which autobiographical theory intersects with trauma theory, we are able to add greater dimension to our understanding of the gap between Christie's autobiography and the Westmacott novels. Using Suzette Henke's idea that autobiography "has the potential to be a powerful form of scriptotherapy" (xv), we can understand the Westmacott novels, in particular, as places in which she is able to confront her trauma through repeated variations of subjective reconstruction that seek to "re-member the fragmented subject and regain an enabling sense of psychic coherence"

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<sup>3</sup> Both Estelle Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography* and Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics* spend extensive time in their introductions investigating the ways that autobiography as a genre is defined by patriarchy. Gilmore specifically emphasizes the fact that "the near absence of women's self-representational texts from critical histories that authorize autobiography indicates the extent to which the genre that functions as the closets textual version of political ideology of individualism is gendered as 'male'" (1).



(Henke xix). And, while Henke defends the category of “life writing” as something that encompasses not just actual autobiography but diaries, novels, and other forms of writing as well, I worry that an automatic treatment of the Westmacott novels under this broad categorization obviates the significance of the gaps between the various forms of writing. A further exploration of trauma theory and the way it interacts with Christie’s fiction will appear in Chapter Three’s discussion of Christie’s relationship to suicide.

### **Mary Westmacott and Feminist Potential**

Using the framework established above, this thesis seeks to take current biographical interpretations of Christie’s life and use the Westmacott novels to slowly develop a complicated portrait of Christie as a feminist and an author of radical novels about women. By focalizing this study around how her identity as an author had to be mediated with her role as mother and wife, I argue that Christie’s experience of divorce, attempted suicide, and motherhood all must be read as shaped by a rejection, or at the very least, a degree of resistance, of her historical context.

Although dozens of biographers have written about Christie, I have relied on the work of three female biographers most heavily. First and foremost, I have used Janet Morgan’s *Agatha Christie* (1984) because she was selected by Christie’s daughter to write the “official” biography and was given widest access to Christie’s personal papers. The silences and revelations of Morgan’s work point to the continuing maintenance and privacy around Christie’s legacy carried on by her family. Beyond Morgan’s official account, I have also made use of Gillian Gill’s *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries* (1990). The first in a long career of writing women’s biography, it serves as a

departure from Morgan's work while still maintaining a conservative approach to the conclusions it draws. Finally, I have also used Laura Thompson's *Agatha Christie: A Mysterious Life* (2018), one of the most recent, most detailed, and most radical biographies. Moreover, Thompson makes great use of and commentary on the Westmacott novels. Together these three significant biographies provide a critical roadmap to understanding the various ways Christie as a person has been and can be read.

Because this project straddles the realm of biography and criticism so closely and is at its heart concerned with identity, there was a struggle as to how to refer to Christie. A woman of many names and identities, biographers prefer an intimate informality and often just refer to her as "Agatha". For the purposes of this project, which is primarily concerned with the figure of her as an author, treating her exclusively as an authorial persona and using only her surname throughout felt like the more appropriate choice, despite sometimes feeling impersonal when talking in detail about that which is highly personal. More importantly, this would hardly be a problem if Christie were a male author and the surname itself, both the connection and break it represents from her first married life, feels like an important feminist note. She took his name and never gave it back. In fact, she made it so famous that it almost stopped belonging to Archie at all.

The second chapter of this thesis will first seek to explore Christie's relationship to marriage. After closely reading her autobiography and the work of some of her many biographers, I will offer a reading of each of the Westmacott novels that works to understand the struggle between the identity of wife and author that Christie explores in the Westmacott novels. By exploring the ways Christie's novels undermine the traditional marriage plot, I focalize a reading that finds the danger and destruction within an

institution Christie's viewed so optimistically. Following the dangerous trajectory started in the previous chapter, Chapter Three seeks to understand the implications for divorce and the potential for suicide that Christie implies in at least four of the Westmacott novels and the positive potential for rebirth that follows. Using trauma theory and the intersections of amnesia and identity that her novels represent, the full implication of the identity of wife for Christie is exposed. Chapter Four then works to pivot away from conversations of marriage to understand the doubly complicated roles of daughter and mother that Christie investigates in each of the Westmacott novels. They become forms of attachment that Christie both resists and works to understand within the terms defined by her time period.

What this thesis will not do is pretend to be able to present a portrait of the "real" Agatha Christie, a figure both unknowable and perhaps non-existent. As Christie states in her forward, "I do not know the whole Agatha. The whole Agatha, so I believe, is known only to God" (*Autobiography* xiii). While Christie has set up any number of decoys and defenses against the public to protect even her most basic sense of "true" identity, the Westmacott novels both offer avenues past such barriers as well as more mystery and complication. Thus, I will do my best to extricate with upmost precision the various ways Christie represents herself to us. I will produce an image full of contradictions that will offer new insight into her most overlooked works of fiction and perhaps let us view the author and her entire body of work within a new, more radical light.

## CHAPTER TWO: DIVORCE COMES AT THE END?

“Up to date, I have only seen four completely successful marriages.

Is there a formula for success? I can hardly think so.”

- Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*

### Modeling Marriage

To understand Christie’s relationship to and representation of the institution of marriage, we must first understand her model for matrimony – her parents. In her autobiography, Christie asserts that “they achieved that very rare production, a happy marriage” (4). Ten years her senior, Fred Miller had known Clara Boehmer since she was a child when she came to live with her aunt, Fred’s stepmother. Christie quotes the love letters her father had written, “every year I have been married to you I love you more,” and the poems written by her mother that her father had saved in “the pocketbook [her] mother had worked for him as a young girl and sent to him in America” (101). However, Christie did not grow up to watch their marriage change with time or her own perspective change with age. Thus, crystallized at a young age, are the idyllic memories of this “good marriage” (101).

For Christie there was very little question that marriage was in her future. Although she was already technically engaged when they met, biographer Janet Morgan describes Archie Christie and Agatha’s courtship and engagement as an almost instantaneous affair followed by two years of emotional turbulence with “first one and then the other wanting to break things off” (61). However, in the end, the high emotional stakes incited by the onset of World War I pushed them to marry hastily during his first

leave. When the war ended and he returned, “it was goodbye to Ashfield and the start of [her] new life, [her] married life” (*Autobiography* 248). However, Christie freely admits in her autobiography not just that she was “slightly lonely,” but she wonders why “newly married wives should ever expect not to be” (250). She saw her new life as part of a “natural” course of events, and she filled her time taking a course in bookkeeping and shorthand.

As biographer Laura Thompson points out, both Archie and Agatha were comfortable expecting a very traditional relationship and she always “put Archie first, even if he did not think so” (163). Her writing never got in the way; in fact, it most likely relieved any tension and boredom in their marriage while Archie spent most weekends golfing. Despite being a mother and a writer, “her marriage was by far the most important thing in her life” (Thompson 163). Even once she was a bestselling author and divorced, Christie still thought of herself as first and foremost “a married woman, that was my status, and *that* was my occupation” (*Autobiography* 418). Her identity as an author would always be on the “sideline,” secondary to that of wife. She conceptualized her work in terms of domesticity, rationalizing that “writing books was only the natural successor to embroidering sofa cushions” (323). Therefore, when Archie announced he wanted a divorce, Christie’s entire world and identity was threatened. She alludes to the divorce early on in Part Seven of her autobiography noting, with the omniscience of hindsight, that as they entered upon a “halcyon period” that “it was then that [she] ought to have felt misgiving” (324). It is in this mode of self-reflexive blame that Christie recounts the end of her marriage to Archie.

Christie remembers the death of her mother as directly tied to the “death” of her marriage. When her mother died, Archie “made his offer of a holiday, the best thing he could think of. There was, he felt, nothing more he could do for his wife” (Morgan 170) and so he left her alone with her grief. In this moment the chasm within their marriage is most apparent. But instead of seeing his failure as a husband, Christie writes, “I see now that I was wrong. My life with Archie lay ahead of me” (334). She portrays her grief and Archie’s dislike for “illness, death and trouble of any kind” as what “left him open to other influences” (334), that his falling in love with Nancy Neele was “triggered off, perhaps by the fact that he had missed his usual cheerful companion in the last few months” (339). Taking the blame on herself in this retrospective, Christie describes the absolute shock and the rationalizations it took for her to cope with this sudden change in which “that part of my life – my happy, successful, confident life - ended” (338).

Beyond just the questioning of herself and her perceived failure as a wife, Christie silences any attempt to speak her true feelings. When Archie speaks like a petulant child about how he can’t stand “not having what [he] wants” and that “somebody has got to be unhappy,” Christie does not reply “but why should it be me and not you?” (340). Her enduring love for him reads through in her refusal, even years later, to see him as a villain. Instead, she understands Archie’s “continued unkindness” during their divorce as evidence of how “deep down fond of” her he was and yet still how ruthless he was in securing his own future happiness (340).

Christie’s biographers differ in the ways they handle her divorce. Janet Morgan warns against speculation into the deeper emotional affairs of the time period out of both a sense of historical accuracy and privacy for the author. Laura Thompson has no such

qualms. She dives into the “tormented” state of Christie’s thoughts at the time and how the loss affected her (Thompson 182). Thompson reads Archie as perhaps not able to understand “that Agatha would mind so much” because “she had so much more in her life than a husband” (183). However, as already highlighted, the acquisition of a husband was a critical part of Christie’s vision of a successful life and thus the divorce left her “white and distraught, as if losing him were a death blow” (Thompson 183). Biographer Gillian Gill, on the other hand, digs into Christie’s resistance to Archie’s request for a divorce. It was not simply about accepting the idea that he did not love her anymore, but rather that he would leave their daughter; “she felt it her duty to protect the interests of her child” (Gill 106). Christie’s resistance to an easy divorce may not have allowed her to speak her mind or do what was best for herself, but it exemplifies her attachment to what she had been taught her life ought to be like. It is the dissolution of this attachment after the death of her mother and her divorce that spurs Christie on through a transformation.

However, while this may have been Christie’s only experience with the trauma of divorce, it was not her only experience with marriage. Finally divorced from Archie in 1928, Christie remarried only two years later. She met Max Mallowan on her solo journey through Ur and their rapid engagement was met once again with indecision. While she thought that “nothing in the world would be as delightful as being married to him” (*Autobiography* 401), she worried about the age gap – she was thirteen years his senior. Yet, unlike her hesitations to marry Archie, this time she was wary of “being hurt again” by a man that she worried was not old enough to know his own mind (401). In the end, Christie weighed the risk against the reward of finding someone with whom it was “as much fun and as easy to talk to each other as if [they] had been married already”

(402). Their wedding and subsequent marriage that lasted for the rest of Christie's life "was quite a triumph" (406). Christie still thought of herself as being a wife, but she no longer saw that role as all-encompassing.

### **Marriage and Mary Westmacott**

Building on this complex portrait of Christie's relationship with marriage as portrayed in her autobiography and by her biographers that this chapter looks to illuminate the gaps that are both filled and widened through the Westmacott novels' depictions of marriage. Although *Unfinished Portrait* remains the most closely telegraphed fictional version of her life and perhaps offers the most obvious emotional insights, the complex ways she tackles marriage within each of the Westmacott novels not only serves as a primary unifying theme throughout each of the texts, but also provides a feminist potential in how Christie evolves within the idea and identity of marriage. She rejects and revolutionizes the typical Victorian marriage plot. She features "bad" marriages that are not all bad and divorces that are both condemning *and* freeing. One novel deals with marriage only in its absence. Another envisions death instead of divorce as the end to marriage.

By considering the novels as part of a literary history of feminist treatments of the traditional marriage plot, it is clear that Christie is struggling with the same issues of female agency within patriarchal societal constructions.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, by reading the Westmacott novels, places in which Christie could creatively dissect her own experience

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<sup>4</sup>Christie would have read and been familiar with the popular novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Authors such as Charles Dickens, the Brontë Sisters, Jane Austen, and Elizabeth Gaskell wrote novels in which the primary plot and ending centered around the successful marriage of a young female protagonist.



with marriage and divorce, we are able to excavate how she understood the trauma of her divorce and endeavored to facilitate a feminist understanding of the institution while remaining cloaked within the privacy of her pseudonym and fictional worlds.

Because *Unfinished Portrait* is used most heavily by biographers as almost interchangeable with Christie's actual autobiography, especially as a way to understand her marriage, I will begin by reading it as not about the reasons and performance of the divorce, but instead as about the emotional trauma that Christie figures within her main character Celia. Celia is first and foremost defined by her naïvety. Her "ideas about marriage were limited in the extreme" and a key tenant of her limited ideas was that "unhappy marriages, and of course she knew there were many such, were because people didn't love each other" (*Unfinished Portrait* 234). It is within this framework and the framework of their engagement that we understand the conditions that both Dermot and Celia brought into their marriage. Upon Dermot's rapid proposal of marriage to Celia, she realizes that although she "wanted to marry Dermot more than anything in the world" (216), they had not known each other for very long, "he was a stranger" (217). Although she is swept away by the "very, very blue eyes," part of her understands the risks of this love, that she "would rather be unhappy with Dermot than happy with anyone else" conditions their relationship on her giving into his sudden desire "to see [her] always – all the time" (216). Even with these reservations, Celia's belief in the strength of their love superseded any internal qualms.

Of course, like in Christie's case, marriage does not start for Celia after the ceremony but instead after the war. It is only then that she faces the reality of marriage, the loneliness, the housekeeping, the separation from her mother and childhood home.

And, as she finally gets to know the true Dermot, she discovers that their relationship, their love, is conditional on her beauty. When he asks her to promise that she'll always be beautiful, she assumes that he would love her just the same if she was not, but for him "it wouldn't be quite the same" (246). Within this conditional and unstable reality of their marriage, Celia's protestations and defense of Dermot become symptomatic of the larger threat she senses. For every time that she reassures her mother that "he's such a dear. And so good. I don't think he's ever done a mean or dishonourable thing in his life" (247), she is bolstering her own confidence that she "was right to marry him" (240). Within the limited set of choices that women were allowed to make for themselves, Celia represented the anxiety surrounding the pressure to have made the "right" choice, a choice that valued love more than money. It is within this system of conditions that Dermot establishes for their relationship that he enacts a system of emotional abuse upon Celia. "One day Dermot hurt Celia," is not the start of a chapter in which Dermot becomes physically abusive, but rather one in which he becomes emotionally abusive (285). As Celia starts to try and find her own identity and confidence outside of her marriage, he calls her silly: "I don't like silly women" (287). This targets the small amount of self-confidence Celia possesses, confirming what she had always suspected, "she was a fool...she'd always known it" and violates the trust and love she had placed in him (286).

Christie slowly shades in the toxic nature of this relationship and Celia slowly suffocates within it, thinking all the while she is in love. She discovers that there were several things "that Dermot didn't like about her" as he defines an impossible circumstance in which he wishes for them to be independent of each other while also

inhabiting a state of jealousy that restricts her from finding any joy outside of him (289). She had to fight “heroically against her passion for sharing, her weakness for caresses, her longing for reassurance” all while never blaming Dermot for his failure to meet her needs in their relationship (290). Their marriage becomes an endless series of incidents in which “Dermot was right, and she was wrong” (296), an escalation that we can imagine repeats the struggles within Christie’s own first marriage and the lasting damage such small incidents of gaslighting and belittling might leave. Christie is slowly revealing the dangerous potential present within the traditional conception of the marriage plot.

The emotional trauma heightened by the loss of her mother culminates in Celia’s experience of the end of her marriage. In words that echo Christie’s account of the day Archie came home for their daughter’s birthday and asked for a divorce, Celia has a sense that “Dermot had come, but it wasn’t Dermot. It was a stranger who looked at her” and it does not fill her with simple dread but “terror” (350). However, when she finally finds out about his relationship with Marjorie Connell, she is unable to accept and comprehend the new reality - her attachment to the promises of the marriage plot is too great. She had fulfilled the conditions of their marriage, fulfilled the conditions she had understood marriage to mean - happiness and love. What she cannot anticipate are Dermot’s true ideas of marriage - “after eleven years one needs a change” and that they had “both agreed that the other should be perfectly free” (354, 355). The emotional turmoil that this unfathomable change wreaks on Celia manifests physically: “the pain in her head increased till she could have screamed” (358). However, it is out of this trauma that Celia begins to forge a new vocal independence. She refuses his request for a divorce and, surprised at her resistance, Dermot “tried to bully her into giving her consent” and thus

the terror returns and is justified (364). It is clear that this novel is offering more than just insight into the events of Christie's divorce, that the fictional realm is the only place where Christie can give voice and proper expression to the traumatic experience of her marriage.

As Dermot becomes increasingly emotionally abusive, Celia renames and codifies him as the "the Gun Man," the nightmare she suffered from as a child. Wounded by his words and the sharp turn their relationship took, Celia becomes paranoid that he is "poisoning her – to get her out of the way" (364). However, she does not allow Dermot to be obviated or excused by his transformation into the Gun Man. Rather, she views them as an interchangeable entity: "the Gun Man was looking for her...Dermot was stalking her down" (366). It is this fear that forces her to relent to the divorce. She is left emotionally shattered. Therefore, I would argue that the palpable fear and struggle present in climax of the novel represents the return of the repressed for Christie and becomes a place for her to confront the trauma that is represented in the failure she finds in the promise of the marriage plot. The danger Celia perceives within Dermot is based on the fear she feels in light of what his rejection means for her identity and place within the world. Whether or not this reaction is based on a larger experience of physical or emotional abuse that Christie is unable to express, it is clear that the end of her marriage is tied to an emotionally traumatic break.

Neatly, we might imagine that *Unfinished Portrait* is the only key needed to fill in the gaps and provide a complete portrait of Christie but, while it may be the most similar to her autobiography, we cannot look to it for all our answers. Marriage for Christie, as

one of the central ways she understood the shape of her life, was an institution and an identity that she would continue to both question and recuperate.

Published in 1956, *The Burden* was the last Mary Westmacott novel that Christie would write. She returns to portray a very familiar type of problematic marriage but this one ends in death, or more specifically murder, rather than divorce. Yet it is here that Christie explores how even the end of a “bad” marriage is not always a freeing and happy ending for the wife. Shirley and Henry’s marriage mirror Christie’s own experience of instant infatuation followed by a hurried marriage. And of course, like in the case of Agatha and Celia, marriage and a life as wife was understood as a given for Shirley. Hobbies and professional study were acceptable ways to spend spare time but, as Henry’s aunt notes, “I don’t suppose you’ll do anything long – you’ll get married” (*The Burden* 107). Once again, youth, lack of money, and speed of engagement gives pause to the people around them, but the intense tenacity of their love wins out. Even so, the clues are clear. Just as Christie describes Archie during their divorce, Shirley admits that “Henry could be ruthless” (119). These early signs of character flaws in future husbands becomes a way for Christie to re-puzzle and sort out the various formulations of a marriage, each in a different mirror of her own.

Of course, the revelations and the red flags only become more obvious during their marriage. Yet, for every flaw, Christie once again depicts the mindset of the devoted wife, a mindset that make excuses, thus Shirley “still found it delightful to be married to Henry, but perceived that it had its disadvantages” (127). Unlike the unfaithfulness portrayed at the end of Celia and Dermot’s marriage, infidelity becomes a constant of the struggle with Shirley and Henry’s marriage. The emotional damage of their marriage on

Shirley is enforced by the cyclical nature of their money woes and Henry's affairs. Sonia Cleghorn, Mrs. Emlyn Blake, Susan Lonsdale – they are not anonymous women, and even though Susan wants to marry Henry, he writes them off “as silly nonsense” (137). When Shirley confronts him, he apologizes, promises it won't happen again, and then becomes “a delightful companion all the evening” (139), and so the cycle begins again and takes its toll on Shirley. However, rather than being suffocated by it like Celia, Shirley finds herself pulling away from Henry and spending time with a new friend, Richard Wilding. Her acceptance that “he doesn't want to hurt me but he's just like that” is not hopeless defeat but a freeing realization (148). However, any clarity Shirley might have gained about her relationship becomes overshadowed by Henry's polio diagnosis.

Christie portrays the role of caretaker as an inherent feature of the role of wife. Therefore, despite the terrible way he has treated her, in his sickness “Henry is the only reality in [her] life now” (155). She is firm in her declaration that she “shall never leave him” (162) and therefore she once again, although this time willingly, enters into a cycle of emotional drainage and manipulation. She continues to be Henry's “safety valve” and he continues the cycle of berating her for being the healthy one and then apologizing (165). And yet, “happiness and a kind of triumph” surge within her as she gives her life and health to care for Henry (169). Like Christie's portrayal of divorce, Shirley's marriage does not end because of her choice or will, but rather that of another person. Laura, Shirley's overprotective older sister, gives extra sleeping pills to Henry to kill him and frees her sister from the toxic relationship. However, what Laura does not understand is that when Henry dies, Shirley might be free from a bad marriage, but she is also untethered from her identity as wife and caretaker in a way that destabilizes her position

within society. This narrative variation that bypasses the occasion of divorce can be read as Christie's exploration of other options. What if there was someone else to blame for the end of a marriage?

However, the end of Henry and Shirley's marriage is not the end of marriage in the novel. Shirley eventually gets remarried to Richard Wilding and escapes with him to an unnamed island. Yet, in a rewording of a thought Celia had before marrying Dermot, Shirley reflects that "I would rather be unhappy, married to him, than smug and comfortable without him" and thus for however much Richard loves her, "no love in the world could be too much to make up to her for all she has suffered" (200, 214). It is thus a very much different kind of second marriage than Christie's. But we can imagine the same reflection, the same regret that Christie held onto throughout her life. The love and loss of Archie never quite healed over, always there to be rehashed on the page safe within the anonymity of the Westmacott novels in an attempt to conquer the narrative and refigure the blame within another person.

While there is for Shirley no happily ever after, Laura serves to repair the reputation of marriage and love within the text. Her all-consuming love and responsibility for her sister prevents her from following the traditional path into marriage. However, when she meets Llewellyn, a man who befriended her sister on the island, she finally faces reality. Before meeting him for dinner, she uses a lipstick called "fatal apple" - she is the fatal apple, a murderer, but she does not hide this from him. In this act of honesty, she is finally able to "accept not punishment but happiness" (295). This final marriage thus becomes a radical act of reparation for the novel. It does not solve all of Laura's problems or pain or past, but it provides an avenue to move forward anyways. Christie

may rely on the standards of the heterosexual conventional relationship, but she frees it from being part of a single narrative and opens the possibilities of love and self-discovery within the institution.

Christie complicates marriage further in *A Daughter's A Daughter* by focalizing marriage as tied to the importance of love and self-knowledge. The first marriage of the book is one that has already ended. Ann Prentice is a widow faced with loneliness as her older daughter leaves on holiday. Like the marriage of Christie's parents, its tragically early end and place in memory allows it to remain as an idyllic example of marriage, leaving Ann to only imagine them "sharing life and its ups and downs together" (*A Daughter's A Daughter* 6). However, within the first few chapters, Christie immediately sets the novel up to not just be about Ann's daughter finding a husband, but also Ann looking for a second husband. The warnings come early as well; the stakes for both marriages laid out plainly - "the wrong companion is worse than none" (18). But marriage for Ann, despite her success in finding love again, is complicated by her daughter. Sarah's selfish rejection of her mother's fiancé causes Ann to send him "walking out of her life" (136). This sacrifice reverberates through the rest of the marriages in the book. The suffering that Sarah and Ann both endure becomes their punishment for this utter lack of self-reflection. Christie exposes marriage as a highly personal choice for a woman, a choice that can be badly complicated by outside advice instead of being based on self-knowledge.

Dame Laura, the omniscient and literal godmother of the text, warns both of them against such mistakes, but her warnings go misunderstood. It is not a stretch to imagine Christie herself speaking with wisdom through the body of Dame Laura, the unheeded



sage of the text, providing the commentary on marriage and female self-knowledge. As Sarah meets her husband, Lawrence Steene, it is through Laura we learn that Lawrence thinks that “it is the impermanence of marriage nowadays which constitutes its greatest charm” which is to say that “Lawrence has been married a good deal” (156). Divorced three times, Lawrence does not ask but rather tells Sarah that she is going to marry him. In this non-proposal and Sarah’s initial refusal, he lays out his conditions. He does not want “romantic devotion” from her; he wants possession of her body and the temporary fun of her company (164). For Christie, this is a critique of a certain type of marriage, one that is not companionate but rather based on a possessive conception of beauty. The fact that Archie left her for a woman that “did not look at all like Agatha, being dark, with a face full of sweet, seductive curves...she had what Agatha once had and had now lost” implies that she might have rejected a world that attempted to allow marriage to be a shallow endeavor (Thompson 180).

Despite Dame Laura’s warnings, Sarah marries him anyways, thinking of the fact that “most of [her] friends are married” and the fun and attraction of Lawrence (192). More importantly for Sarah, however, is the declaration that “I’d hate to be poor” (193). Financial security was a real consideration for women who entered into marriage with the understanding that they would rely on their husbands to provide for them and was something that Christie refused to do. Yet it is not the choosing of financial safety that Christie punishes Sarah for, but rather choosing any sort of safety over love at all. More than just questioning the role of marriage within a woman’s life and identity, Christie instead seeks to make sense of a world that refuses to reflect the ideals of companionship and love she had so idealistically anticipated and seemed to observe in her own parents.

The Westmacott novels become part of calculating and portraying the types of marriages she saw and sought to avoid.

The drugs and despair that go on to characterize Sarah's marriage to Lawrence underline Christie's condemnation of not taking on the risk and adventure of true love. But Sarah does finally reclaim her agency in her relationship and decides to leave Lawrence. It is in this moment of confrontation that the toxic possessiveness of Lawrence is most obvious; he calls her "at the moment, my most prized possession" and "a Collector's Piece of extreme rarity" (246). Of course, Sarah has more than an emotional tie to Lawrence; her addiction to his wealthy lifestyle manifests itself within a physical addiction to drugs. The presence of addiction in the text is representational of the desire and appeal of the idea of the marriage plot and the glittering promises it makes. To end a marriage or the addiction, Christie knows, is not an easy choice to make, but in this novel, she allows the wife to make the choice instead of it being made for her. Once again, it is here that Dame Laura assists in helping Sarah understand the "courage and resolution and willpower" she will need to truly divorce herself from her life with Lawrence (248). With this new self-knowledge about her own desires and mistakes, Sarah is finally able to take the risk and go to Canada with the man she loved all along. With this ending, readers see how Christie continuously uses the Westmacott novels to figure narratives of happily ever after as predicated on the development of feminine self-knowledge.

In her effort to recast and reexamine the institution of marriage for women, Christie continued to emphasize the importance of self-reflection and knowledge for women, a concept she appeared to practice as well as preach. Referred to by Christie as

the novel that satisfied her most completely, *Absent in the Spring* features a “bad” wife rather than husband. It is the least romantic of the Westmacott novels and it is Christie’s most tragic depiction of marriage. Joan Scudamore’s dedication to propriety and conventionality force her to understand her role of wife only in terms of something to be accomplished. A successful marriage is the central feature of the perfect life that she believes herself to have achieved. It is not something she thinks of in terms of love and passion, but rather of stability and tradition. In other words, Joan believes she is the living embodiment of the marriage plot. What Christie does in her most psychological study of marriage is force Joan to break down her conceptualized appearances of her marriage and understand the problems at its roots. It becomes a chance to discover what lies beneath the supposed “happy and peaceful life they had had together” (*Absent in the Spring* 3). The greatest foundational flaw in their marriage is Joan’s husband’s career choice. For Joan, the key to a successful marriage is one in which the husband has a respectable profession that can offer comfort. Thus, when Rodney wants to give up his training as a lawyer to run a farm, Joan talks him out of it thinking she was being “wise for the two of them” (32). This choice forces both of them into an arrangement that appears practical and successful, but in reality, slowly suffocates.

Stranded in the desert, Joan has little else to do but battle through the tension of the reality of her memories and the narrative she attempts to enforce upon them, a struggle with which Christie must have also dealt. As she remembers Rodney’s kiss with “the Randolph girl” (37), she ignores the signs towards deeper problems in her marriage and “she blamed the girl. Men were so easily flattered” (38). Christie is portraying the oppressive patriarchal structure of expectations that have taken root in Joan deeper than

just controlling her ideas of marriage. It extends into how she is able to view her own bodily autonomy and self within her role as wife. She remembers an artist asking to sketch her and then kissing her “with a violence and a brutality that had momentarily deprived her of breath” (41). Even as she remembers him telling her “you’re the sort of woman who ought to be raped...I’d rather like to rape you myself” (41), she refuses a deeper interrogation of the trauma. This mental repression of anything that erodes her narrative of conservative propriety reinforces the primary tension at the novel’s center.

On her way to her climatic realization of the problems within her own marriage, Joan considers the marriages of her daughters. While Rodney protests against the possibility of their daughter Barbara marrying a man she doesn’t love in order to “just get away from home” (47), Joan dismisses his concerns because the idea that her daughter would want to get away would threaten her idyllic conception of her harmonious family. This pattern is repeated with their second daughter; however, in this instance, more is revealed about Rodney’s idea of marriage. When their daughter Averil wants to run away to marry an already married tuberculosis doctor with a sick wife, Rodney invokes the sanctity of marriage, defined as “a contract entered into by two people...and each partner brings himself and herself specifically to honour the terms of that contract” (125). More importantly, he describes the risk to the doctor’s professional reputation, “a man who’s not doing the work he wants to do – the work he was made to do – is only half a man” (127). Within this framework, we understand why Rodney stays with Joan despite the fact that she has reduced him to “half a man”.

Even this memory, as it accumulates with all the others, is not enough to catalyze any change within Joan. She remembers a love letter her father wrote her mother and then

finds it “impossible to imagine Rodney writing such a letter” (151). It is only after she collapses on a walk in the desert thinking of her husband and of the woman she suspected he loved, Leslie Sherston, that she finally understands the reality of her situation. She understands that she had worried more about Rodney and the Randolph girl than Rodney and Leslie because “it would hurt her pride less” (175). Leslie was a dutiful wife to a drunk and a criminal. She was poor and had to work hard and she “was not even beautiful” but she was happy (176). Her life was the opposite of what Joan had been told to want out of life. Leslie represented the life that Rodney could have had but that Joan took from him. It is then that Joan understands that “she had loved Rodney and yet she had done this thing to him” (179). In the light of this revelation about herself and her marriage, Joan returns to England determined to apologize to Rodney. But upon return to “civilization”, her time marooned at the desert train station feels like a dream, a dream that no longer connects with her return to her real life. Every realization that she had uncovered is written off: “she had imagined the whole thing,” and she retreats back into the blind comfort of her previous outlook (201), rewriting the narrative in her mind to facilitate the easy way of life before. These are the limits and necessity of self-knowledge that Christie explores.

It is only in the epilogue that Christie allows the full tenor of the novel’s tragedy to be felt. Viewing Joan’s return through Rodney’s eyes, we truly understand why he calls her “poor little Joan” (215). He may be unhappy in his marriage, but Joan is “alone and [she] always will be” (215). Although, we might be inclined to pity him, he forces us to see the true force of Joan’s condition. For Christie, however, this is more than just a condemnation of a marriage without self-knowledge. It picks apart the underlying forces

that imprison Joan within the narrow mindset that restricts her ability to build real relationships with her husband and the other people around them. She is so concerned with appearances and the way she had been raised and conditioned to behave that she can only see things for how they seem instead of how they really are. For Christie, this novel becomes an imagining of the worst-case scenario for how a marriage might go, how her life might have ended up had she stayed with Archie.

Class and the role of love in marriage are once again weighed and held in tension in *Giant's Bread*. For Vernon Deyre nothing except for marrying the love of his life, Nell, matters, no other considerations or hesitations. However, for Nell, like Joan and Sarah, marriage is not simply a question of love but of money. Although Christie promotes love over any other consideration in marriage, Nell's considerations are not treated with dismissal. Her thoughts are given weight: "the shifts, the struggles, the evasions, the desperate fight to keep up appearances...you didn't think of it as marrying for money" (*Giant's Bread* 178). As a person who came from a constantly shifting financial background, Christie understood the severity of the considerations and had most likely thought, like Nell, that "she didn't want to be poor – she hated the idea of being poor" (179). And yet they marry anyway. Christie allows Nell's change of heart to remain ambiguous. While she pronounces that she "always knew that [she] loved him, but [she] just hadn't the courage," it is clear that her newfound courage is not separate from her new understanding of what the onset of World War I might mean (275). Just as it had for Christie and Archie, the threat of death that the war posed hastened along and eased any hesitations for many couples, thus before Vernon is deployed, they "were married in the church of St Ethelred's Chelsea" (278).

However, for Christie, marriage is entwined with ideas of sacrifice; it was the only way she could understand a woman's role within the institution. As Merja Makinen argues, in the end "the artist's genius comes from a dramatic rejection of marriage and family" (21). For Vernon this means the end of his marriage to Nell. Her remarriage to a second, wealthier man after she believes Vernon to be dead frees Vernon and ties her to tragedy. Although he saves her from a sinking ship at the end of the novel, when she finally realizes that she loves him, Vernon no longer wants her, "George is an awfully good chap and you're really happiest with him" (*Giant's Bread* 436). Instead of this being a release for her to freely find happiness in her marriage, it ends with "last cry of despairing appeal" for all of her fearful mistakes (436). Nell becomes the failed wife with whom Christie might have identified.

Beyond the tragedy of Nell, Christie repeats the narratives of love unrealized, of the marriages that never happened. It is Vernon's cousin, Joe, who comes to live with his family after her mother dies, who asks, "Why should I marry anyone?" (85). After a childhood of watching her mother remarry multiple times, she has come to the conclusion that "all men are beasts" (85). And, although when she is older, she has numerous affairs with men, she refuses to marry Sebastian. It is only when she is dying that she realizes that she had followed the same path as her mother, "I was going to be so much wiser than she was, and I've made such a mess of things" (423). Christie figures the struggles of love and marriage for women as generational, as directly connected to the way in which marriage was modelled for them. Just as Christie desired to be as devoted as her mother was in her marriage, Christie also depicts Joe as influenced by the model her own mother enacted within marriage. However, even as Joe is dying of consumption, Sebastian's

desire to marry her becomes the redemptive end to their tragic story, betraying Christie's sentimental attachment to the institution and her perception of its ability to be reclaimed as positive.

But beyond Sebastian and Joe and Vernon and Nell, the truest and most unforgiving relationship in the text is between Vernon and Jane. The fact that Vernon never marries her is the central "mistake" of the text. Not only does she sacrifice her voice attempting to sing the opera he writes, but she also remains by his side as he lives under a new identity in Russia. She is a constant companion, a constant supporter of his music, and she never asks for anything more. It is only at the very end, when the ship they are on is sinking and Vernon saves Nell instead of Jane that he realizes the mistake: "Yes, I've always loved her...I see that now...I was a coward there, like everywhere else – trying to escape from reality" (431). It is too easy to read Christie like Makinen does and see the "gendered stereotype of the woman devoting herself to her man's success" as problematic (21). Instead I would insist that we read Christie as writing herself into the role of the artist like Vernon, and thus Jane's death and sacrifice becomes part of a larger commentary on the tension between the creation of art and external romantic relationships. Vernon is only truly able to create at the end when "there was nothing now to come between him and his work" (*Giant's Bread* 437). But Christie does also figure herself within Jane, the woman whose sacrifice for the man she loves is written off. The marriage plot is not only altered because of the nature of war, but also because of the nature of artistic creation. It is this nebulous interaction between Christie's role as author and her role as wife that vies for space and understanding on the page, both validating and complicating the nature of her feminist impulse. Through a narrative exploration of



these competing identities Christie exposes the precarious struggle not just for women, but for female authors in particular.

Only one Westmacott novel lacks the beginning or the end of a marriage. *The Rose and the Yew Tree* includes an engagement and the breaking of that engagement, but even when two characters run away with each other, marriage is absent. Foreshadowing the tragedy of the text, the novel begins with the main character, Hugh Norreys, getting into a car accident that leads to the end of his engagement. However, while Christie highlights the true near-miss nature of the situation, Hugh cannot translate the end of the relationship himself. His sister-in-law Teresa has to translate the way that illness “tended to make you see things as they really were” (*The Rose and the Yew Tree* 28), which lead to why it changed and ended his relationship with his fiancé. It is within this context that Hugh falls in love with Isabella Charteris while narrating the story of how she falls in love with John Gabriel. Raised within a household of three old women, Isabella grows up with the understanding that “one day [she] shall marry Rupert,” her cousin and heir to the St Loo Castle and fortune or, as Hugh says, “and Lord and Lady St Loo were to be married and lived happy ever afterwards in St Loo Castle by the sea” (90). However, Christie is clearly not the author of fairy tales and idealized marriage plots.

Instead, after Gabriel wins his seat in British Parliament, he leaves politics behind and Isabella leaves a life with Rupert behind for the pleasure and pains of adventure, of an anti-establishment life. Yet this is not a riding off into the sunset moment for Christie. From the first time Gabriel and Isabella meet, their relationship appears toxic. When Gabriel takes a lit cigarette and “pressed the glowing end down to the skin” of Isabella’s arm (118), the masochistic and sadistic coloring of their connection is illuminated. This

passion is further problematized when Gabriel admits to needing to “drag her down...to humble her, to drag her down to earth, to see her look ashamed” (167). His insinuations to raping Isabella are met with disgust from Hugh but acceptance from Isabella herself. Thus, when they run off together, it is not a surprise to find out later that they never marry. The marriage plot becomes fully thwarted. As Isabella defines it, marriage “would mean becoming part of someone’s life...fitting in...taking your place...and its being your rightful place – where you belong” and that was never part of her relationship with Gabriel (244). Christie allows this knowledge and acceptance to be Isabella’s source of happiness despite the squalor she lives in with Gabriel. The only tragedy would have been their marriage. For Christie, who could only imagine running away with a man unmarried in her fiction, this novel might be her most radical in how it defines marriage. *The Rose and the Yew Tree* is a novel of near marital misses, of the way that love does not always translate to marriage, and the strength of character that it takes to understand such matters – realizations Christie worked and wrote to uncover.

### **Cruel Conclusions**

Of course, Christie’s traditional detective fiction also deals with the issue of marriage from Tommy and Tuppence’s relationship and Poirot’s single status to the various murders motivated by unhappy marriages, but it is rarely the focal point. The Westmacott novels, as seen, do more than just highlight the problems of marriage. In six different but cyclical ways, the Westmacott novels serve as a feminist reconsideration of the traditional marriage plot by a woman who struggled to balance both the identity of wife and author. The novels do not deny the desire that idealism might inspire in the neat

boundaries and happiness promised within the marriage plot, but the novels do question the primacy and danger of such narratives for women. In this alternative form of autobiography, we bear witness to Christie's process of refiguring and replotting her idea of marriage and, while finding it a risky business, she does not end up dismissing it. She leans into the risk and the rewards of female agency and knowledge that such risks inspire.

In this primary narrative tension, I would conclude that we can best understand Christie's complicated relationship to marriage in terms of Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*. Although I would not go so far as to say that all marriage is a form of cruel optimism, it is not a stretch to classify Christie's initial experience and basic conceptions of the institution as such. As Berlant states in her opening, this type of toxic status "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" and she specifically notes it might be "a kind of love" (1). In Christie's case, it is not so much her love for Archie, but her devotion to the ideal of marriage and status as a wife that serves as an obstacle.

If every attachment is optimistic, then nothing is more optimistic than Christie on her first wedding day. As repeated over and over again, for characters like Celia and Joan and even Isabella, the concept of marriage is the pinnacle of their "fantasy of the good life" (Berlant 1). It promises emotional and physical security, a new identity, and a guarantee against loneliness. But, of course, marriage not only fails to deliver on these promises, but it also often leads to the exact opposite. Yet, while the trauma and nature of Christie's first marriage clearly exemplifies the nature of cruel optimism inherent in her idealization of marriage, her second marriage functions differently. The difference,

however, was not her choice in husband, although Max was very different than Archie, but her relationship to the entire institution - her “object of desire” was no longer holding her back professionally or personally. With Max she was able to write and live with a sense of independence. She was not reliant on him for a sense of identity or for emotional or financial security - she had figured out how to meet those needs all on her own.

Reading Christie’s life within this framework, the Westmacott novels are the autobiographical evidence of this transformation and escape out of her cruelly optimistic relationship to marriage. However, escape has its price, a risk Christie perhaps did not foresee. To undergo this transformation, Christie had to write about more than just her relationship with marriage; she had to give voice to the one period of her life that still remains a mystery – her eleven-day disappearance.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT SILENT POOL

“If one chooses to look back over the journey that has been one’s life,

is one entitled to ignore those memories that one dislikes?

Or is that cowardice?”

-Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*

#### Reading Disappearance

Regardless of all the mysteries she herself authored, the mystery that Christie will forever be associated with is her own disappearance. On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1926 she left her Berkshire home and was not seen again for eleven days. Her car was found abandoned by a nearby lake called Silent Pool and a nationwide manhunt was triggered. When she was found in a hotel in Harrogate, she claimed to remember nothing. The official story became amnesia from a head injury in a car accident and the Christies never spoke of it again. The only clue that indicates a more personal and emotional narrative is the fact that Christie had checked into the hotel under the name Theresa Neele, the surname being that of her husband’s mistress. Of course, none of this is even hinted at in Christie’s official autobiography.

Biographer Janet Morgan seeks to offer the final official word on the subject. Similar to her dismissal of speculation around the divorce itself, Morgan chides that “there are moments in people’s lives on which it is unwise, as well as impertinent, for an outsider to speculate, since it is impossible to be certain about what actually took place” (129). She then attempts to re-account the facts, the discrepancies between Christie’s secretary’s various muddled accounts, the misinformation spread by the newspapers, and

the vague explanations given by Christie as she gradually recovered her memory. But because of the proximity to Silent Pool and the gaps in the narrative, Morgan does acknowledge Christie's "dazed and irrational state" but dismisses "those who believe she wished to kill herself" by pointing out the fact she packed a nightgown (154). For Morgan, both the private and unknowable nature of the situation precludes her from making any sort of larger or more serious hypothesis about the possible significance of Christie's disappearance.

Other biographers have no such qualms. Laura Thompson, for example, imagines an entire chapter of the possible series of events and thoughts that Christie experiences during those eleven days. Most significantly she implies that the location of the car by Silent Pool, "deep as death," would indicate at least the consideration of suicide, "she was not, in fact, at the edge" (Thompson 190). Her following stay in Harrogate is then explained as an escape from the pain and pressure of her life, a conscious choice.

Biographer Gillian Gill attempts a less dramatic reasoning in understanding the disappearance. She highlights the fact that Christie "had been deeply depressed through much 1926" as a result of her mother's death and her husband's request for a divorce (Gill 100). Parsing Morgan's "official" account, Gill still comes to the same conclusion as Thompson: "she experienced a severe mental breakdown, she may have even tried to take her own life during the early morning of December 4" (116). It is understandable that Christie, as well as her family, might want to remove this traumatic moment from the official narrative of her life.

However, while Christie might have omitted this emotionally traumatic period of 1926 from her autobiography, what she does reveal is the subsequent period of re-birth.

After a period of healing and writing in the Canary Islands, Christie decided to take a trip on the Orient Express by herself, “I should find out now what kind of person I was - whether I had become entirely dependent on other people as I feared” (*Autobiography* 348). She then titled the eighth section of her autobiography “Second Spring”, an optimistic follow up to “The Land of Lost Content”. Gill reflects this shift as well, noting that Christie “had grown up at last” (259) and what she had grown up into was a writer. It is in 1928, during this re-birth, that Christie writes her first novel as Mary Westmacott, *Giant’s Bread*.

While Christie’s consideration of suicide remains a hypothesis, I argue that the evidence to be found in the Westmacott novels imbues a greater degree of certainty upon Thompson and Gill’s arguments. Of the six novels written as Mary Westmacott, suicide or attempted suicide is a theme in four (or perhaps five) of them. Christie presents attempted suicide as an emotional impulse triggered by a depression after the loss of a system of identity, and a place from which growth and rebirth can occur. By figuring the fugue state as a mental response to a traumatic break with identity and the consideration of death, Christie not only writes through her own trauma, but also exposes the dangerous attachment that society’s prescribed roles for women represent. As Anne Whitehead lays out in the introduction to *Trauma Fiction*, the use of literary techniques in which “temporality and chronology collapse” allows authors to “narrate the unnarratable” (3,4), a tactic that Christie makes great use of in the Westmacott novels. In this way, each of these novels becomes a place in which she reclaims and gives narrative to the emotional trauma she experienced at the end of her marriage.

### **Suicide: Aborted or Ambiguous**

With two years of separation between herself and the events of 1926, Christie was ready to make the first steps towards understanding her possible relationship with death and subsequent amnesia and “so, with a rather guilty feeling, [she] enjoyed [herself] writing a straight novel called *Giant’s Bread*” (*Autobiography* 456). Much like Christie’s own life, Vernon Deyre has an idyllic upper-class childhood that ends with the start of World War I. The setting of the war allows Christie to emphasize death as ambiguous and thus Vernon dies twice. The first time he dies is in “the telegram which informed her with deep regret that Lieutenant Vernon Deyre had been killed in action” (*Giant’s Bread* 323). They hold a memorial and mourn his loss but there is not body to be put in the family vault. This death in absence not only evokes the thousands of families who held similar burials without bodies during the War, but also uncertainty that the lack of the body enforces.

Pages later Christie performs a resurrection - Vernon was not really dead but rather a prisoner of war and escaped into Holland. However, just as we discover he is alive, he discovers that not only is he dead, but also that his wife is getting remarried. Christie highlights this loss as the triggering event towards the spiral of a second death for Vernon; “the thing was not to believe – not to think. Put it away – right away. It wasn’t true – it couldn’t be true – if you once admitted that it might be true you were done” (344). Perhaps not unlike the night she walked out of her house and got into her car, Christie depicts Vernon “walking – walking very fast. He must get away – get away from the thing that was following him” (344). It is then that Christie emphasizes the dominate frame of mind that precedes Vernon’s attempt at a second death. The idea that



“something must happen,” which echoes through Vernon’s mind, implies the effort to exert action and control over a situation of loss which has blindsided him (345). In this way, Christie depicts suicide as the “one way to get out of it all – to be at peace – only one way” (345), an impulse that follows an emotional trauma. The breakdown of narrative thought in this moment emphasizes the break from identity as a husband, as a man of the Deyre family, as a person that Vernon experiences. It is “a non-experience, causing conventional epistemologies to falter” (Whitehead 5). He is not just fulfilling the prophecy of the telegram but also attempting to oblivate his identity entirely. Therefore, when he “stepped out into the roadway right in the path of the lurching lorry that tried to avoid him too late” (345), he attempts to restore balance to his universe and exit the traumatic moment of disassociation through his own death.

However, like Christie, Vernon’s brush with suicide does not result in his death, but it does result in a change in identity and thus a type of death and re-birth has been accomplished by the act anyways. In Vernon’s place, we meet George Green, a name comprised of the first name of his wife’s new husband and the last name of his imaginary friend growing up, a name plucked from the subconscious in the moments after both the physical and emotional trauma of the suicide attempt that resulted in complete amnesia. However, unlike Christie, who essentially resumes her public identity, Vernon does exit this fugue state and regains his memories but chooses to remain “dead” and escapes to Russia to pursue his music. He sacrifices all his romantic ties to the world so that “there was nothing now to come between him and his music” (437). It is only in the end that we truly understand the history of the composer who is introduced in the novel’s prologue, Boris Groen. For Goren, who is also Green and also Vernon but also not, to become the

genius avant-garde composer he must first be reborn as an individual creator. Moreover, the fact the novel began at the end, with a performance of Boris Green's work, underlines the instability of the timeline within the narrative. To end at the beginning not only evokes the cyclical nature of the trauma that Christie constantly cycles through in the creative process.

While Christie herself remarries and does not cut herself off from all social relations, she finds value in the tragedy of the outcome she wrote for Vernon. However, this remains only her first attempt to understand her life as an artist and as a woman through the Westmacott novels. It is a novel that she not only chooses to publish under a different name, but also one that uses a male protagonist to further amplify the distance between reality and fiction. It is a story Christie is hesitant to own and she writes it off in her autobiography as being "mainly about music" (456), a true overstatement.

Unlike *Giant's Bread* which she comments on briefly, she only mentions her second Westmacott novel, *Unfinished Portrait*, in a passing comment regarding the discovery of her pseudonym by her friend Nan Kon. Her silence on the novel is revealing. Suicide in this novel, however, is not the climax but the entire frame of the narrative of trauma that *Unfinished Portrait* represents. Once again, the story begins at the end – Larraby meets Celia just as she is considering throwing herself off a cliff. He convinces her to postpone her action by having her tell him her life story. It is during this story that we learn that Celia had tried to kill herself before during the turmoil of the end of her marriage. Christie depicts Celia's fractured mental state as the result of the emotional abuse inflicted upon her by Dermot. Thoughts of her daughter and Dermot give way to the fact that "...nothing mattered to her now but her own agony and her

longing for escape” (*Unfinished Portrait* 374). However, for Celia it is not just the loss of her marriage that sends her to the edge, but the loss of her other great love, her mother. Many biographers argue that the most important relationship that Christie ever had was with neither of her husbands, but rather with her mother. The fact that her depressive episode and probable suicide attempt coincided with not just the end of her marriage but also the death of her mother speaks to the cataclysmic nature of the emotional grief Christie endured during that time. And Celia does jump into the river, only to be fished out and saved. This second chance at life forces her to confront the reality of the divorce proceedings and spend ten years raising her daughter.

In Christie’s own story, this is the moment of true re-birth wherein she takes control of her own life and remarries. But for Celia the occasion of remarriage triggers what can only be defined as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and sends her into the suicidal position we meet her in at the start of the novel. While PTSD did not exist then in the way we understand and name it now, beyond the concept of “shell shock” following World War I, as Cathy Caruth defines it in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming even or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begin during or after the event” (4). Thus, we clearly are able to read Christie’s description of Celia as a struggle with PTSD. The night before her second wedding, she finds herself once again faced with a man who requests that she never be less beautiful and “he said it in the same voice that Dermot had said it” (394). In this instance the traumatic figure and threat of the Gun Man returns, and she flees for fear of entering into a marriage that will be as painful as the last. By the time

she reaches the island, Celia is depicted as calm and logical in her decision; she has “thought about it a good deal...and it really *is* best” (9). Suicide becomes the only way she can escape the cycle of reoccurring trauma.

It is here that Christie foregrounds the relationship between suicide and fear. It is out of fear that Celia “can’t live with someone...I’m too miserably afraid...” (396). This fear of the Gun Man, of the male lover turning into the threat, becomes the unspeakable reality that shapes how we understand Christie’s own refusal to speak about her disappearance. In order for Celia and perhaps Christie to overcome this fear, it needs to be both confronted and disarmed. It is not just about keeping from the public a personal moment in which she had perhaps considered ending her own life, but also the cowardice that she believed such a choice to represent. It becomes an issue of personal failure. What power she does give Celia over the fear in the situation is the power that comes with giving voice to one’s own story, even if it needs to be mediated through multiple frames. In telling her own story, in giving voice to the trauma and the fear, Celia is able to confront the Gun Man and see “he was just an ordinary human being” (399). By figuring Larraby as the Gun Man at the end of the text, Christie very literally disarms the dangerous potential that relationships with men had come to represent for her.

Yet, the ending remains ambiguous. We are not told what happens to Celia save for Larraby’s “fixed belief that Celia went back into the world to begin a new life” (400). A sense of re-birth is implied, but muted. But perhaps it offers a sense of privacy for Celia’s life that Christie herself would have appreciated after her own divorce. It is this degree of separation between the protagonist of the text and the author that not only attempts to obviate the real subject and create a sense of anonymous privacy, but also

stunts a degree of ownership of the narrative. Like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the novel is presented as a manuscript written by the painter Larraby but then mailed to his sister Mary. Who is the true Mary who authors or publishes the text that sits before us? Perhaps it is Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie, distorting her voice through layers of narrative voice only to obfuscate her own personal investment in the work done by this story.

Like *Giant's Bread* and *Unfinished Portrait*, *The Burden* also presents suicide as the conclusion of the end of a relationship. Although remarried, Shirley remains traumatized by the loss of her husband and the sense of identity she attached to her love and dedication to him. When we meet her on the island, once again through the eyes of a male narrator, her mysterious and unnamed status reinforces this sense of lost identity. When Lewellyn Knox meets Shirley, he seems to predict her untimely death, seeing her akin to a rose that "would not visibly wither. It would just, in the course of time, drop to the ground" (187). And if the look of her was not enough to convince him and the reader of her risk of suicide, their first conversation does the rest. Over her nightly brandy, Shirley expresses the desire "to go *away* somewhere...into some kind of unreal place that doesn't really exist" (191). However, by restricting access to her mind, Christie, instead of exposing Shirley's mental state to the world, protects her from the judgment that Christie herself felt exposed by after the press storm of speculation during her own disappearance. It cultivates a sphere of privacy that Christie herself sought.

Yet, Knox asserts that her death is "an open question" that, in her inebriated state, stepping in front of the lorry could have been an accident (293). In this case, the focal point of trauma was tied to substance abuse. Shirley's alcoholism becomes the indicator

of the larger need for escape from the trauma of dislocation that the death of her husband enforced. For Christie, the mystery, the ambiguity here is critical. The truth of the story belongs to no one except Shirley. Moreover, even though death does occur in the text, so too does re-birth. Shirley's death is what enables her sister Laura to move on, to finally marry and find happiness. It forces her to confront the implications of her actions and move on from them. Christie does not point to marriage or a relationship as the answer to Laura's problems, but rather to the self-knowledge that her sister's death ignited. Of course, this happiness is idealized within the conventions of heterosexual marriage of the time, but it is clear that the function of Knox as both narrator and eventual husband is more as a plot device to highlight the connection between Shirley and Laura and their fates than as any meaningful character. We are allowed to be interested in the mystery his introduction inspires, but never as invested in his fate as we are in Shirley and Laura's – they are the characters that are endangered by their attachment to their roles as caretakers and whom Christie uses to expose the consequences and mechanics of this social repression. In this way, the trauma is not just formulated on the loss of identity or a loved one, but on the larger precarious position women are forced to exist within.

In *The Rose and the Yew Tree*, suicide is once again treated most ambiguously; death, however, is the foremost concern of the novel. At the widest scope of the book, the suicidal impulse seems to be primarily located within the novel's narrator, Hugh Norreys, who is confined to a wheelchair after a car accident. During his recovery he accumulated a stash of sleeping tablets as a "means of exit" from his "helpless state" (*The Rose and the Yew Tree* 84, 83). However, the exit represented by these pills is clearly depicted as more of an idea than an actual intention because despite having "more than enough to do

the trick,” he found that “the urgent need for it retreated” (84). When Isabella hides the tablets from the discovery of the other characters through the novel, she is not enabling his suicide but preserving the peace that having a plan represented for him. In this way, Isabella becomes the true character in which we might understand Christie’s curious relationship with suicide. Hugh acknowledges that “she is no fool” but he also saw “there was no clue at all to what she thought” about his potential suicide (85).

The only clue we are offered through which to understand Isabella is her view on death. Upon seeing a dead bird, she confesses “I’m afraid of death – horribly afraid. I can’t bear anything to be dead. I suppose it reminds me that I – that I shall be dead myself one day” (79). It is this comment that makes the ending of the novel so ambiguous. Why does Isabella, a person afraid of death, put herself in the path of the bullet meant for John Gabriel, the man who has mistreated her? Was it suicide or sacrifice? Is there any difference? Unlike the previous depictions of suicide, we only hear of Isabella’s death second hand and are not permitted access into her mental state. The trauma becomes obscured by the text and the time frame in which we are presented information. We have only John Gabriel’s death bed words that she “flung herself in front of me as he pressed the trigger” and that “she knew what she was doing. She knew that it meant death-for her. She chose death – to save me” (262).

The ambiguity of this narrative speaks to a multitude of possible moments of trauma. Whether Isabella let herself die to escape the traumatic nature of her sadistic relationship with John Gabriel or because of a larger disconnect from the life she had planned as Lady St. Loo, she becomes consumed by the narrative voice of John Gabriel and Hugh Norreys at the end of the text. Like in Shirley’s case, Christie appears to often

hesitate to reveal the truth behind the mystery and privacy of these moments. Of course, Christie refuses to let death or sacrifice be in vain. The novel ends with John Gabriel's assertion that her death, "it was the beginning" and his realization of her love and sacrifice was what inspired him to become the Father Clement we meet in the novel's preface (262). This is the re-birth that such proximity to death inspires.

### **There Is A Lonely Isle: Liminal Spaces and Rebirth**

Like *Unfinished Portrait*, the setting of suicide and therefore the origins of re-birth in *The Burden* is an island. As Heidi Scott explores in her essay "Havens and Horror: The Island Landscape", islands are "metonyms for modes of fantasy thinking where extremes that diverge from the mainland quotidian may take hold" (637). Scott goes on to read the horror potentials of Solider Island in Christie's *And Then There Were None*, but in the case of the Westmacott novels, Christie uses the island as a liminal space in which to escape society and effect positive growth.

The epigraph for *Unfinished Portrait* features an uncredited poem that begins "There is a lonely isle/Set apart/ In the midst of the sea/ Where the birds rest awhile" and focalizes the importance of the novel's setting (2). A completely anonymous island, the picture of the palm trees running down to the beach and "the grounds of the Villa – cool and refreshing with great cypresses standing dark against the skyline" becomes a picturesque imagining of an island, completely foreign to any location in England (*Unfinished Portrait* 4). The beauty is contrasted by the danger the high cliffs and surrounding water. It is an escape from the world of tradition and expectation that England represented for Celia. She viewed it as a beautiful place to die, to transgress, and



instead it functions as place in which she was able to confront her fear and continue on with her life.

The island in *The Burden* functions in much the same way. At the start of Part Three of the novel, the switch to Lewellyn's narration of his arrival on the island evokes a very similar feeling to the start of *Unfinished Portrait*; we are in a new world and approaching it from a safe distance. The location is instantly identified as place where someone could "pace and take stock of himself and the future" (*The Burden* 173). Moreover, its liminal and removed status is highlighted; "the accentuated tempo of civilization was left behind here" (174). The emotional response to the landscape could have been from the memories of Christie's own time on the Canary Islands after her divorce. For Christie this tempo of modern civilization is criticized within the image she paints of the island; "the hard faces of the career women, the ruthless face of mothers, ambitious of their young, the worn grey faces of the business executives fighting incessantly so that they and they should not go down and perish" (*The Burden* 174) – the sort of prescribed forms of identity that she finds toxic for women in particular. However, for Shirley, rather than be a place to rest and then depart from like in Celia's eventual case, she departs in a much different way.

For Shirley, her anonymity and new identity as the wife of Richard Wilding, as simply "Señora", as the English woman, only exacerbates her feeling of loss at the death of her husband. Christie foregrounds this sense of simultaneous entrapment by grief and sense of untethered identity within Shirley's alcoholism, a factor in her eventual death. She views her copious amounts of nightly brandy as the thing that "helps [her] to feel – free" (*The Burden* 190). The setting of the island therefore serves as Shirley's final place

of contemplation, the slow progression outwards from society where she can transgress and commit a “sin” in private anonymity and ambiguity.

Although, as I stated at the start of this chapter, only four the Westmacott novel’s deal with suicide, an honorable mention must be made to the circumstances described in *Absent in the Spring* for the importance of the liminal, island-like setting, and its role in re-birth and self-discovery for Joan. Marooned at a rest house in the middle of the desert, Joan is isolated from the trappings of society; around her there was nothing, “no landmarks, no buildings, no vegetation, no human kind” (*Absent in the Spring* 24). This very different type of “island,” however, functions in very similar ways for Joan. Her walk into the surrounding desert in a haze of agitation as she confronts the repressed mirrors a type of suicidal impulse. She quickly becomes lost in a very dangerous terrain and climate, yet it is in the liminal space between life and death that she is finally able to understand the reality of her situation and marriage. The erratic and dissolving state of mind full of ellipses create the hallmark of how Christie depicts the frame of mind that inadvertently fuels these dangerous impulses.

Of course, in the end she is saved. She wanders back to the rest house after all and shortly thereafter the train returns to ferry her back to reality and society. And, as noted in the previous chapter, the self-knowledge that Joan obtains on the island does not result in a change for her. Unlike Celia or Shirley, Joan returns to the world unchanged by an experience Christie had seen as fundamentally affecting to women and critical to what she saw as a “happily ever after”. In this case, it is the very setting of London itself and the return to her former world that actively works to erase any progress Joan made during her marooning. Her return to the “not romantic, nor beautiful, just dear old Victoria

station just the same as ever” contrasts starkly with the solitude of the desert, and it becomes easier to mentally separate the sense of self cultivated there as something that can also be left behind (196). While Celia’s fate remains ambiguous, and Shirley’s tragic, the fate of Joan is what we might imagine Christie’s to look like if we had not been gifted with access to her written work and the identities present within it.

### **The Many Marys and Agathas**

While this chapter has already made reference to the work of Mary Shelley, it has yet to note the importance of the connections to the Mary who came before her. Mary Wollstonecraft’s two suicide attempts, chronicled not in her own words but in a memoir written by her husband, mirror an emotional state and relationship situation not unsimilar to Christie’s own. This is not to link Christie to a line of emotionally distraught females and their various romantic struggles, but rather to relate her to the great lineage of feminist British writers. Though they had perhaps very different ideas about marriage and led very different lives, at one point or another Wollstonecraft and Christie both became mothers and had tumultuous relationships with men and perhaps they both considered or attempted to end their own lives and wrote subsequent narratives about that emotional struggle. One of the potential endings for Wollstonecraft’s unfinished novel *Maria* is suicide. By reading Christie in this world instead of as commercial and conservative detective fiction writer, her legacy is not just complicated but also found in good and exalted company.

Yet, at the end of the day, the Westmacott novels are fiction like anything else, and Laura Thompson’s chapter about what may have happened during those ten days can

be considered as true as anything else. Many might resent Christie for this fact, for in every other way she has offered a solution to even the most confounding of mysteries. Of course, she tried to offer us something to at the very least distract us from the lack of satisfying denouement that her own life presented. Her autobiography and other fiction attempted to present a unified front, to offer a cohesive sense of public identity that we could accept and that would leave her own private self, if not a mystery to be pondered, something to be overlooked entirely.

Instead, I have opted to pry inwards, despite Janet Morgan's warnings, into the innermost traumas and struggles of Christie's life, the struggles she had with how she fundamentally understood herself as woman beyond that carefully crafted authorial persona. However, the effort seems to me to be with the best intentions. It is not to expose her innermost struggles, but to explore the way she had already exposed herself. For Christie, the fundamental threat of this mediation between her identities can be understood through the trauma she experienced within her attachment to the roles for women as she understood them. The importance of being a wife and the trauma of the way in which that identity was taken from her and the gap that this trauma represents within her official narrative remains her biggest accomplishment within the Westmacott novels. To not only be able to write back against experiences of trauma and attempt to make sense of them through narrativization, but to also repeatedly stress the fatal danger that women are placed in when they only understand themselves in terms of wife is, I would argue, Christie's most fundamental and overlooked literary accomplishment. And to further and finally understand the feminist that struggled within the traditional front

Christie attached to herself, we must turn our attention to the most important relationship and role of her life, that as a daughter and mother.

## CHAPTER FOUR: MURDER IS EASY – MOTHERHOOD IS NOT

“There is nothing more thrilling in this world, I think, than having a child that is yours and yet is mysteriously a stranger.” -Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*

### Daughterhood vs. Motherhood

The love of Christie’s life, Laura Thompson argues, was neither of Christie’s husbands – instead it was her mother. Described in the opening pages as “an enigmatic and arresting personality...startingly original in her ideas, shy and miserably diffident about herself” (*Autobiography* 4), Clara was Christie’s idol. Because her father died when she was eleven and her two siblings were significantly older, for most of her young adult life it was just Christie and her mother. Thus, they had a close emotional bond. At age eleven, Christie was told by her extended family that she must be her “mama’s little comforter” and that became a role that they served for each other their entire lives (102). She interweaves her memories of growing up with memories of her mother doing things like reading Dickens aloud to her and how she would cheat “by missing out a certain amount of sob stuff in Dickens, particularly the bits about Little Nell” (137). Or her first memory of homesickness upon starting at a new school in France and the moment she “burst into tears and flung [her] arms around” her mother’s neck (141). These accounts of their relationship offered up by Christie decades later paint a portrait of a mother and daughter who relied on each other as partners in life. Moreover, it was her mother who encouraged Christie to write even at a young age, getting out paper and an old typewriter one day.

Therefore, as previously explored, the death of her mother was a cataclysmic event in Christie's life. It was not an event that she had to be notified of; she writes in her autobiography that "it was going up in the train to Manchester that I knew, quite suddenly, that my mother was dead" (334), a coldness that indicated the loss of the person who had offered the most warmth and comfort for her entire life. Although she eventually fast forwards through the mental breakdown that accompanies the end of her marriage, she does foreground that period with this attention to her mental state after the death of her mother. The act of saying goodbye and excavating her childhood home, the place that represented everything her mother was to her, did ignite a period of emotional turmoil and "the beginning of a nervous breakdown" (337).

However, there is a more complicated portrait of this deep relationship – Christie writes about other motherly figures, namely her nanny or "Nursie". Although she had an extremely close relationship with her mother, she was not raised on her mother's hip as we might in envisioning such relationships and parenting today. Among a certain class in Christie's time, parenting was much less attached at a young age and much more reliant on hired help. At a young age, her relationship with Nursie seems to precede her relationship with her mother. It is Nursie whom she called "the outstanding figure in [her] early life" and who "represented the rock of stability in [her] life" (15, 11). It was Nursie who understood the made-up games and worlds she created and told her stories and indulged her whims. Of course, Nursie's departure also becomes her "first real sorrow," and Christie wrote to her every day after she left (35). Her mother may have been her longer companion, but it is her nurse that Christie focalizes as the source of her happy childhood.

For Christie, becoming a mother herself was, like becoming a wife, a natural part of life. But it was not a role that she allowed to consume her. She was “thrilled” at the prospect of having a baby, a thing which she had thought was “practically automatic” and was surprised at the length of time it took for her to conceive (251). However, her initial enthusiasm for what she had viewed as an integral piece of adult womanhood and married life was diminished by constant morning sickness. She thus describes pregnancy as “like a nine-month ocean voyage to which you never got acclimatized” and when she finally gives birth, she is primarily excited not about the baby, but not feeling “sick anymore. How wonderful!” (253). Of course, she later does turn her attention to the newly born Rosalind and notes that “though [she] personally consider[s] newborn babies definitely hideous, Rosalind actually was a *nice-looking* baby” (253).

After Rosalind’s birth, Christie immediately began procuring the feature that was so key to her own idyllic childhood – a nurse. She reflects later that “looking back, it seems to me extraordinary that we should have contemplated having both a nurse and a servant, but they were considered essentials of life in those days” (255). What follows are countless chapters of autobiography through which a revolving cast of nurses enter and exit the Christie household for various financial and personal reasons. From a racist Jessie Swannell who’s “one grudge against life in England” was its lack of “blacks” to Cuckoo who “would stand outside the door of the room where [Christie] was writing, and keep up a kind of soliloquy, ostensibly addressed to Rosalind” (259, 298), the role of the nurse allowed Christie the time and space to be a writer and a mother. Furthermore, Christie also had few qualms about leaving Rosalind for long periods of time. After growing up in a household in which her parents would travel and leave her with family



members for extended periods of time, Christie does not hesitate to leave Rosalind with Mage, her sister, and accompany Archie on his round the world tour.

It is only during her divorce that Christie runs into a strong level of conflict between her role as mother and her role as a wife and as an individual. She acknowledges that Rosalind and Archie “understood each other...better than Rosalind” and she did (332). But her divorce throws this gap between Christie and her daughter into sharper effect and she worries that “it was the wrong thing to do...as far as Rosalind was concerned” (339). However, she does not linger on her divorce nor the effects it had on her relationship with her daughter or her role as mother. She just continues writing and traveling and finding herself outside of her role as mother. Upon setting off on her first solo journey on the Orient Express she wrote, “I should find out now what kind of person I was – whether I had become entirely dependent on other people as I feared,” marking the departure from the anxiety of selfhood that the role of mother and wife threatened (348). Leaving behind her daughter after her divorce allowed her the space to develop as a person outside of the roles she had always sought to fulfill.

Starting with this first trip to the Middle East a couple of years after her divorce, we witness Christie’s “second spring” and Rosalind remains a minor character who spends her time at various boarding schools. It is during this period of development for both of them that they grow into two very different and independent people, a very different relationship than the one Christie had with her own mother. When trying to decide about whether to marry Max, Christie consults Rosalind whom she refers to as her “home oracle” and as “someone who always considers all possibilities” (402). However, although their love was not as emotional or effusive as Christie and Clara’s, they still had

a strong attachment and Christie describes fond memories of swimming and traveling with her daughter.

The complicated nature of Christie's relationship to her mother and to her own daughter is highlighted by her biographers. Like Thompson, Janet Morgan is quick to acknowledge the strength of the relationship between Christie and her mother, calling Clara "an especially possessive mother" which in turn "fed Agatha's devotion, which for a time was to become an obsession" (1). She focuses specifically on the way their relationship shifted after Christie's father's death. It was a period of time in which Christie was constantly anxious about her mother's death and "would creep along the passage and listened at the door to ensure that her mother was still breathing" (Morgan 35). And it was during this time in which for financial and social reasons "Clara depended largely on Agatha for companionship and amusement" (35). Morgan contrasts this with Christie's relationship with Rosalind, whom she loved but also "felt a certain distance" (107). She may have given birth to Rosalind, but they had their own separate lives.

As previously stated, Laura Thompson focalizes the influence Christie's mother had on her life. She describes how Clara's "influence upon Agatha – both by omission and involvement – was almost absolute" and, more importantly she was the "person who made imagination both possible and safe" (Thompson 8). However, as Thompson explores the effects of the devotion that Clara and Christie offer each other, she also illuminates the effects of the patriarchy that Christie grew up within. Although she was surrounded by strong female figures from her mother and grandmothers to her sister, "Agatha was never a feminist" and she viewed the value of women as related to the

power they could exert within the comfort of the home (26). Of course, this publicly stated stance remains at odds with her role as a writer. Thompson's interpretation of Christie's perhaps detached approach to motherhood is that "so in love was she with being a daughter that she was unable to find true fulfillment as a mother" (122). And moreover, Rosalind was naturally an independent spirit who did not need the cloying attachment of maternal love that Christie found herself unable to conjure.

Echoing Thompson and Morgan, Gill's portrayal of Christie's relationship with her mother does not linger on the depth of the connection but does acknowledge its importance on Christie's formative years. Gill's more tempered exploration of the women who shaped Christie's childhood, however, offers similar conclusions – Christie's "conventional and conservative childhood" shaped how she viewed women's roles and power (21). However, unlike Morgan and Thompson who are comfortable stating plainly the distance between Christie and Rosalind, Gill couches her interpretation in various terms of vagueness. She describes Christie's reaction to having a daughter as "ambiguous" and argues that "it is not clear that Agatha Christie saw any risk in leaving her daughter behind for such a long period or imagined she might possibly cause her lasting psychological pain" (Gill 66,68). What Gill does explore quite importantly is the way that Christie valued and treated her relationship with her first husband as more important than with her daughter.

While Morgan might argue "that it would be a waste of time to discuss whether Agatha's fiction simply reflected or sought to rationalize her own preference for emotional independence," this chapter attempts to do so anyways (109). However, I do agree that it is "foolish to try to fit Agatha into some general category – even of her own

making – of a type of mother” (Morgan 108). Therefore, what this chapter seeks to understand is not just how Christie understood motherhood, but how her identity of mother competed with her identity as daughter and as a writer and as simply a person in her own right. Like Thompson, I argue that Christie’s attachment to her role as daughter conflicted with her ability to become a mother. Though I might not say she was in love with being a daughter, I would say that it was a female familial identity that did not diminish her ability to also be an author in the way that the role of mother threatened to do. Reading the Westmacott novels in this way allows for us to see the complex struggles Christie had with this form of identity and how it was tied to her socioeconomic status and the historical context of the first World War.

### **Mary and Motherhood**

While, as previously explored, *Absent in the Spring* is about Joan’s marriage, it is also about her understanding of what it means to be a mother. It is an exploration of different types and failures of motherhood. If Joan is the failed mother, we are left to measure her against the other mothers in the text. The entire premise of the novel, the traveling Joan is doing that leaves her stranded in the desert, is that she had to travel to Baghdad to take care of her sick daughter. However, it is quickly made clear that the type of mother that Joan thinks of herself as stands at odds with reality. This early emphasis, however, on the way she views her children and the idea that she had “every reason to be proud of their upbringing and of their success in life” works to contrast the outward markers of successful motherhood and the emotional experience on the part of the actual mother and daughter (*Absent in the Spring* 3). She might have taken “infinite pains” in

how she raised them and educated them, but the result was children who could not get away fast enough (3). Both her daughters married as fast as possible and moved as far away as possible to be away from their mother and the control she attempted to exert over their lives.

All of this is in direct contrast to Blanche Howard, one of Joan's old school friends and a woman who took a very different path. Blanche had two children but left them with her husband when she met another man and "went off with him and left the children behind without a second thought" (7). Although Joan is scandalized by Blanche's unconventional choice, her repeated thought of "poor Blanche" rings with misplaced pity. She is less unsettled by the perceived coarseness of Blanche than of the freedom and rich life that Blanche was able to live because she broke from the societal regimentation that had been taught to both of them at school.

This misplaced pity reemerges in Joan's memories and thoughts around Leslie Sherston who didn't care about money or the state of her own or her children's clothing but was cheerful with a smile "that was rather nice, and people liked her on the whole" (56). Like Blanche, Leslie presents an entirely different mode of mothering that is similarly inaccessible to Joan's comprehension. When her husband is sent to jail, she learns to grow and sell her own fruit and vegetables to feed her children and refuses the offer of a wealthy aunt to take the children away. It highlights the financial measures of comfort and success that Joan values over the emotional connection and bond between mother and child and the benefits it brings.

Over the course of the novel, Joan is forced to confront the reality of her failure as a mother. She remembers a time in which her daughter pointed out that all the feeding

and bathing and caretaking is done by their Nannie, that her role in the household is merely figurative and accomplishes very little actual work. She is forced to reassure herself that people like Blanche “had simply no maternal instinct whatsoever” but that she and Rodney “had really been very conscientious parents” not like Leslie Sherston who would play with her children (94,95). And it is this understanding of the potential of other ways of living, of being a mother, and of being a wife, that form the basis of Joan’s understanding of how she has failed her family. Of course, as already mentioned, Joan’s discovery does not result in any change. This tragic fate enforces Christie’s dismissal of this type of gilded motherhood that is blind to the necessity of a deep emotional connection. It reflects Christie’s own conflict between how she understood her own upbringing versus society’s changing expectations and her own ability to connect with her daughter. Christie may have done everything right for Rosalind, but did that make her a good mother? These questions haunt the Westmacott texts.

Notably, *Giant’s Bread* is dedicated to the memory of her mother; however, it is less about Christie’s relationship with her own mother and more about her struggles with how she views herself as a mother. In this way, just like how we have read Christie with the characters of Vernon as well as Jane within the text, we can also read Christie as Myra, Vernon’s mother, and Rosalind as Vernon. For Christie this first novel, written after the turmoil of her divorce, becomes a place in which she wrestles with how she views herself as a mother – a failure. Of course, Christie’s ideas of motherhood are tied to her class and her early experiences and reliance on hired help. Vernon’s early experiences with the central figure of his Nurse are directly shaped from Christie’s own, and yet also could reflect Rosalind’s own experience of being raised by a nurse. As Vernon discovers

the “twin star, Mummy and Daddy” and the ways that “Mummy became quite a personage” (*Giant’s Bread* 16), Christie reflects on the secondary status of this learning process which reflects the physical and emotional distance that Christie’s understanding of motherhood relies upon. Because the character of Myra only comes into focus through the critical eyes of Vernon, we are presented with the hyper critical and skewed way that Christie imagines her own role as mother to look like through the eyes of her daughter. For instance, when Vernon is pleased that “he was like his father,” we are offered a reflection of how Christie viewed the close bond between her husband and daughter (17).

The relationship becomes more complicated and fraught as Vernon grows older. He can understand that “she was his mother and she was beautiful, and he loved her” (19), but those facts remain hollow. She looks like a mother and acts like one, but a true emotional connection never develops. Because of the way she is unable to understand him and her use of him as more of a prop than her actual child, he views her in a similar way. When he injures himself, he only trusts Nurse Frances to help him not his mother whose “big white hands of hers were strangely clumsy. They hurt where they meant to help” (51). This symbol of hands as the objects through which the actions of mothering are accomplished allow us to see into how Christie understood her failure – her hands may have been clumsy with her daughter, but not at writing. This tension between the role society expected her to fulfill and her career becomes something Christie struggles to both represent and accept. This distance and tension never lessen. When Vernon goes off to school, he is not homesick; “he had no real passionate attachment to his mother. All his life he was to be fondest of her when away from her” (79). This is a direct contrast to the

homesickness Christie herself felt being away from her mother and the lack of homesickness she felt Rosalind experienced.

However, also in the background of this relationship is the effect of Vernon's father's infidelity. It doesn't alter the way Vernon understands or sees his father; it just changes the rotation of nurses and maids that work in his nursery. However, as Vernon grows older, he does witness conversations between his mother and uncle about issues of divorce and marriage and forgiveness. Although, Christie does not explore explicitly the issue of divorce in this text, Myra's marriage ends when her husband goes to war in South Africa. Either way, the result is the separation between a father and child who were "curiously in harmony" leaving a mother and child who care for each other but cannot understand each other (77).

Meanwhile, *The Burden* might not lack an emotional connection between the mother figure and the daughter, but it does lack an actual mother. Although the death of both parents results in a default maternal role for Laura, the real moment she becomes a mother to Shirley is when they are much younger and still have both parents. When a fire breaks out, young Laura runs back through a burning hallway to save her baby sister and "from the moment that she struggled through smoke and flames with Shirley in her arms, her life had found its object and meaning – to care for Shirley" (*The Burden* 81). This all-encompassing sense of purpose from childhood mimics and magnifies the pervasive societal emphasis on motherhood. That this other person should be the object "satisfying all cravings, fulfilling her vaguely understood need" rather than her own sense of self, forms the basis of Christie's critique of a certain prescribed form of motherhood (81). Early on in the text, a grown-up Shirley and Laura lay out the parameters of a certain type



of motherhood: Shirley reassuring her sister that she is “not in the least the domineering kind – at least not to me. You don’t boss or bully, or try to arrange my life for me” (78). Of course, this becomes the warning of the book and the set of conditions that Laura violates in her attempt to do what she thought was best for Shirley.

The culmination of this violation of the type of controlling mother or, as Shirley puts it, “the kind of mother who eats her young” occurs when Shirley and her sick husband move back in with Laura (78). Laura admits only at the very end of the novel that she purposely gave Shirley’s husband a second dose of sleeping tablets when he asked for them knowing the second dose would kill him. She thought she was freeing her sister from having “her whole life to be wasted, ruined” caring for her sick husband (289). Instead, her transition into the extremes of a controlling type of mothering initiates Shirley’s destruction. It is only when Laura finally is forced to confront the unhappiness her choices created, that “Shirley paid” for Laura’s mistakes, that Laura is able to understand her own identity outside that of a mother to Shirley and “start again” (294). The novel ends with her feeling and understanding the burden or the “weight of love” (296). For Christie, it is clear that what is to be criticized is not the burden of love but living a life that does not recognize the role of the burden and that acknowledging its presence allows for its load to be managed and lightened and lived with in a way that does not have to be oppressive or all consuming.

Like *The Burden* and, as its title might suggest, *A Daughter’s A Daughter* focalizes the complicated relationship between the mother and daughter within the text. The primary struggle within the text is Ann’s failure to find her own identity and happiness outside that of her daughter and the way she punishes her daughter for this

failure. Within the very opening pages, Ann reflects upon how different her relationship is to her daughter versus her own relationship to her parents in which “affection had not been taken for granted” and was expressed with duty on both sides (4). We can feel Christie’s own worry at the distinct generational shift that has occurred wherein “casual and kindly indifference...was the fashion to assume” (5). Her worries over the interdependence between herself and Sarah reflects the consuming nature of the roles society has restricted them to. Ann struggles to imagine a fulfilling life after her husband’s death and her daughter’s marriage. However, although it was something she was unable to imagine organically, the idea of her daughter “living one life. She, Ann, living another...A life of her own” fills her with a “fairly pleasurable sensation” (8). Through the wisdom effused by Dame Laura, Christie finds voice to expose her own views on “the natural second blooming” of women after they are done raising their children and the “fact that we have only one companion in this world, a companion who accompanies us from the cradle to the grave – our own self” (13). In her echoes of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *Solitude of Self*, Christie reveals her own struggle with writing that self within the larger context of being a woman during the span of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The clash between Ann’s development as a person outside of a mother and the fulfillment of a life of her own and re-marrying is ruined by her daughter’s possessive retention of her mother. Like society, Sarah attempts to control her mother’s choices and trap her within the role of mother permanently and this is reflected in her objections to her mother’s fiancé. In turn, Ann rebels and avenges this injustice enacted upon herself by her daughter and the world by not deterring her daughter from marrying the wrong man. Although married, Sarah never becomes a mother, allowing her to retain the

freedom of daughterhood and more easily leave her husband. Like Laura, it is only at the end of the text when Ann confronts the way her actions have been controlled and negatively impacted her own life and the life of her daughter that she is able to forgive and move on. And, at the very end, Ann relinquishes her role as mother and reverts back to the position of daughter, a position Christie sees as freeing. In this reversion, Edith, the long-devoted housekeeper, takes on a maternal role, helping Ann to bed and feeding her, and like Celia, there is the promise and potential of this adult entering the process of growing up again, of having her “second spring” and learning to define herself outside the world of wife and mother.

All of this leads back to the role of the mother/daughter dichotomy present in *Unfinished Portrait*, in which Christie most clearly telegraphs her struggle to transition from the role of daughter into that of mother. In the opening scene when Larraby characterizes Celia as a child, he is recognizing the way she had clung to her identity of daughter. Although like Christie, Celia’s memories of childhood feature the caretaking done by Nannie, they focalize her relationship with her mother. There are fanciful stories and “the kind of game that was only possible with Mummy” (*Unfinished Portrait* 46), but more than being a relationship that fostered imagination and amusement, Celia felt that it was only her mother who understood her and it is this recognition of the emotions Celia is unable to speak that earns “a great welling up of love” (77). It is this love and bond that Celia feels the lack of when she finally leaves her mother to start her own home after marrying Dermot. However, the lack is not one-sided. When Celia returns to visit her mother, Miriam “had revived – was her old self again” (246). This reliance on each other

results in both a fulfilling bond, but one that also stunts both their ability to thrive independent of the other.

Moreover, Celia's attachment to the role of daughter, paired with her heightened expectations of what a mother/daughter relationship might look like, sets her up for "failure" as a mother to her own daughter. In a more detailed and emotional account than her own moment of becoming mother, Christie's depiction of Celia giving birth to her daughter, Judy, reinforces Celia's resistance to entering the role of mother. The fragmented text that follows the moment of birth rejects any moments of maternal bliss. Celia's exhaustion overshadows any maternal instinct, "She had got a baby, had she? It didn't seem to matter...She just wanted to be let alone..." (266). The only thing that comforts her is seeing her mother. Upon meeting her baby, she notes that "she did not feel at all like either a wife or a mother. She felt like a little girl come home after an exciting but tiring party" (269). This reflection on the start of motherhood points most clearly towards the complicated relationship Christie had with the transition into motherhood. Even after a lifetime of experience and reflection, her autobiography could not be the place in which she could express this struggle and reticence to take on a role that was seen as "natural". Life was much easier if she remained a girl, remained a daughter.

Returning to the period of time Christie wrote about the least and yet represented in great emotional detail in *Unfinished Portrait*, we can see how upon the death of her mother and the end of her marriage Celia is forced out of the role of daughter and wife and fully into that of mother. She never attempts suicide again after the first time because she felt that "the only thing [she] could do to make up was to live only for Judy" (379).

She felt that her divorce was a failure of her ability to be a mother because “a mother ought to keep a child’s father fond of her” and that guilty mentality trapped her into a type of motherhood that was loving but never fulfilling the “wonderful and satisfying” bond she had with her own mother (389, 334). Celia acknowledges that Judy “only wanted [her] physically – like a little animal when she was ill, but it was he and she who belonged together in mind” (383). However, what this reality does expose is that beyond the experiential and societal expectations Celia had for motherhood, she does not blame herself for her lack of connection to her daughter because she could never “give her the other things – the things that matter to [her] – because she doesn’t want them” (390). This is a moment of reparation for Christie who has, across the novels, struggled with what it means to fail as a mother, perhaps worrying to what extent was the nature of her relationship with Rosalind her own fault for focusing on her writing and her husband and what part was simply tied to their individual natures.

Finally, an outlier in many ways, *The Rose and The Yew Tree* presents a novel in which motherhood is only significant in its absence from the book. Isabella, whose mother died during her birth, was raised by her grandmother and two great aunts, but she is clearly not mothered by them. They educated her and molded her into their version of a young lady but she still gives off the air of “the princess imprisoned in the ruined castle” (*The Rose and the Yew Tree* 34). Thus, she exists within a liminal space, one that Christie obviously found interesting, in that she was neither daughter nor ever to be a mother. Her rejection of the marriage to her cousin and her lack of marriage to John Gabriel exists as not just a dismissal of the role of wife but of motherhood as well. She remains her own

person. In this way, free of the constraints of motherhood or wifedom, Isabella's actions remain her own, even the one that ends her life.

In this way, the entire text seeks to render motherhood an impossibility. Not only does Isabella never become a mother, but also the other main female character, Hugh's sister-in-law, remains married but childless. Even the men in the text are restricted from performing the act of impregnation that could lead to motherhood. Hugh is in an accident that leaves him in a wheelchair. John Gabriel becomes the celibate Father Clement. The potential and reality of motherhood is excised from the text wholly. This both focalizes the issues of marriage and other forms of relation in the text while also making the novel a solitary example of the way Christie sought to not just understand her own relationship to motherhood, or the way society enforces the role, but a possible rejection of the identity altogether.

### **Birthing a Book**

About the process of writing *Absent in the Spring*, Christie writes "it is an odd feeling to have a book growing inside you" (*Autobiography* 485). It was not just that Christie grew up in a world that made it most accessible and permissible to couch her experience as a writer within the language of motherhood, but that she saw these identities as tied together and as complicated and important way. As she recounts the short few days of labor and the exhaustion that followed, "I remember I slept for more or less twenty-four hours straight through" (485), she links artistic creation to her truest and most successful form of motherhood, offering in the section more vivid imagery than the scene in which she actually describes giving birth to her daughter.

In this way, Christie accessed and celebrated a very different kind of motherhood within her autobiography. Reading it within the context of the radical insights of her Westmacott novels, we are able to reconsider how we view the many layers of life that Christie both attempts to hide and share in her narrativized version of her life. Although she might have intended to present the story of a woman, a wife, and a mother who happened to have a very illustrious literary career, it is clear that her autobiography also offers the story of a different type of motherhood – one in which she “births” sixty plus offspring. None of this is to say that Christie was a bad mother, and the still living Rosalind has gone to great lengths to steer conversation away from any conclusions that an unkind reader might make from reading Christie’s fiction. What this chapter does seek to evaluate is Christie’s understanding of her own relationship to motherhood and by default to daughterhood. Just as in the instance of the role of wife, the role of mother was one that Christie felt ought to have been natural only for it to chafe against her growing identity as author. Of course, she was able to mitigate this clash through her financial ability to hire caretakers, but that did little to relieve the larger emotional tension that the role presented for her. At least within the safety of her fiction, Christie was able to work through her own conflict and present a world of possibilities and understanding for other generations of readers.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS ON THE TABLE

“So there we are, all of us, little Agatha Miller, and big Agatha Miller, and Agatha

Christie and Agatha Malloyan proceeding on our way – where?”

-Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*

### Queen of Crime

Twice Christie mentions in her autobiography her “two summits of ambition fulfilled” (518), and we might suppose that these two pinnacles of success and satisfaction for Christie would be related to her family, to the achievements of marriage and motherhood that she so clearly appears to extol. Instead these two “things that have excited [her] most” were meeting the queen and buying her first car, a grey bottle-nosed Morris Cowley (307). For Christie these two moments of professional and personal freedom and excellence stand out in her memory more so than the birth of her daughter or either of her marriages— a fact that, like the nature of the Westmacott novels, stands at odds with her less authorial image that her autobiography attempts to emphasize. Of course, perhaps those moments would have never been categorized by Christie in the same way; under the idea of “ambition”, perhaps having her daughter was more of a private moment of excitement and happiness. Nonetheless, the repeated emphasis on these moments of professional achievement reveal a crack in the illusion that the autobiography presents, which engenders the current within my argument surrounding the critical feminist potential of her Westmacott novels.

The contradiction is deepened and complicated when we consider the other major love that Christie emphasizes throughout the text – her love for Ashfield, her childhood



home. Represented over and over in the various idyllic childhood homes of Westmacott characters like Vernon and Celia, there is only one home that Christie dreams of into old age; “the old familiar setting where one’s life first functioned” (518). The house is not just a symbol of her love for her mother but of her life at its most simple, before the pressures and expectations of society or readers. It overshadows the various homes she made with either husband, the ones she raised her daughter in, the ones she named after her own fictional estates of mystery, the many homes she bought with her own money. It is clear from the attention and frequency of their roles within her fiction and their mention in her autobiography, that grand houses were an obsession of Christie’s. However, it is Ashfield that reigns supreme as the model that all subsequent imaginings or purchases would be measured against. But for Christie, who bids “Goodbye, dear Ashfield” in the epilogue to her autobiography, the place in which she grew up and began to write was tied to her sense of identity in a way that encapsulates the bliss of falling in love with Archie, the struggle of giving birth to Rosalind, the pain of losing her mother and part of herself. This identity is at the heart of the various “Agathas” that battle for space on the page of the autobiography.

Like many biographers, I have used the Westmacott novels to fill in the unfinished and contradictory portrait that the autobiography offers. With the goal to uncover the radical Christie that remained disguised behind a more commercial and conservative persona, I have often been lost in this tangle of experiences and personalities. My goal must constantly be redefined and refined with each new discovery – how can we understand Christie and her work as feminist despite her many attempts to convince us otherwise. She may state that “the position of women, over the years, has

definitely changed for the worse” and that women wanting to work has put them “on par with the women of primitive tribes who toil in the fields all day” (*Autobiography* 121), but this clashes with her own attachment to her career and the hard work that sustained her both financially and emotionally. Beyond her career, I have traced through the Westmacott novels the various ways this identity as a career woman had to be negotiated against a conservative belief that prized the domestic roles of wife and mother over personal desires - for Christie this was both a question of commercial palatability and personal conflict. And it is a conflict and a question that fights for answers not just within the Westmacott novels, but within her fiction more broadly.

### **Detecting the Self**

However, what my argument has heretofore not overlooked but sidelined is the relationship that both the autobiography and the Westmacott novels have to the larger canon of Christie’s detective fiction – the books that earned her the title and status that underlie those two moments of fulfillment. Although there have been large and exclusive moments of attention paid to these works from the vast majority of Christie scholars, once again very little has been done in considering the larger implications of including the Westmacott novels as not separate but integrated among her detective fiction. This is to both call for using them as primary examples and studies of her work seamlessly along with her other novels as well as using the Westmacott novels as a framework for better understanding her traditional fiction as a whole. Expanding upon the idea that Sarah Whitney puts forth in her article “A Hidden Body in the Library: Mary Westmacott, Agatha Christie, and Emotional Violence” that “by approaching Christie’s work from the

perspective of the Westmacott novels, we more fully understand the principles and the preoccupations within her canon” (37), we can read four of Christie’s major works of detective fiction within a new perspective. The narrow selection of these lesser known examples of Christie’s detective fiction is not to highlight exceptions to the trends within her writing, but rather to offer an analysis of a handful of particular examples that most obviously mirror the thematic interest of the Westmacott novels. Themes of marriage and motherhood are present invariably in all of Christie writing and by reading this fiction through the lens of the Westmacott novels, they are freed from the genre constrictions that limit our ability to fully witness Christie’s key intersections between authorship and womanhood.

Not only does *Murder at the Vicarage* introduce Miss Marple, whose spinsterhood plays a significant role in our discussion of motherhood, but it also features issues surrounding both the role of wife and mother. Griselda, the Vicar’s wife, is the antithesis of what the world told her she should be, and she is unapologetic for it. She admits that “she is *not* a housekeeper by nature” and that any of the results of those failings, such as the bad food, are really “nothing to make a fuss about” (2). Underneath the comic relief her character’s irreverence supplies, in contrast to her serious and reverent husband, remains a commentary on the true nature of a “good” wife. Christie highlights the power Griselda holds over her husband. Not only did she make him fall in love with her over a twenty-four-hour period, but also despite his attempts at guiding her, she is constantly diverting him and his attention. But this power dynamic is not merely subtext; Griselda admits that she married Clem because “it made [her] feel so powerful”

(5). More importantly for Christie, Griselda enjoys reading detective fiction, enjoys the mystery and the intrigue, the very things a vicar's wife should not be eagerly reading.

Yet, at the end of the novel, Griselda is a soon-to-be mother and vows to be "a real 'wife and mother' as they say in books" (229), books she has purchased to finally learn how to emulate such titles. Though it is clear that these are just for show, she already knows and states that she is "a very good wife" (229). Instead, like Christie's autobiography, they gesture towards the roles that society wishes her fulfill absolutely and that she does not mind playing along with, knowing all along that she holds the upper-hand, the power to make men confess that they adore her while making threats to have an affair. Although she is a secondary character within the text, by reading *Murder at the Vicarage* through the lens of the Westmacott novels her role and commentary on the role of wife and mother resonate clearly with Christie's conflict and frequent rejection of traditional ideas of motherhood and marriage. Just as much as Celia or Joan, Griselda is another version of Christie, one that reveals a confidence in its rejection of the status-quo.

Motherhood and its relationship to female identity is further highlighted with Christie's portrayal of an aging Tuppence, who has gone from young single adventurer in *The Secret Adversary* to middle-aged married mother in *N or M?*. Beyond anything about the war or espionage, *N or M?* is simply, like *Daughter's a Daughter* or *Unfinished Portrait*, a novel about a mother finding her identity after her children have left the house. The world asks for knitting and a sort of quiet motherly duty until the day a woman dies, but in this novel Christie envisions a fulfilling and empowered life of self-discovery and agency for women once again after their initial years as wife and mother. Those identities are not erased but they are also not all encompassing. When Tommy is

offered a mission during the Second World War, Tuppence inserts herself into the action, requiring permission from no one to seek adventure and purpose. The false identity that she assumes for this act of espionage utilizes the role of mother to enable a sense of purpose and career instead of something that obscures or overtakes that sense. All of this underlines the fundamental trust and respect that Tommy and Tuppence have within their marriage: that she neither asks for permission nor needs it.

The issue of motherhood within the text is further critiqued not just by the character of Tuppence, but also by the very plot itself. Once again, while the story might be read with the emphasis on the reveal of the mystery and the context of World War II, Christie simultaneously makes the grand reveal tied to the issue of motherhood.

Tuppence is able to discover the identity of “M” because of the risk Mrs. Sprot took by shooting another woman attempting to steal “her” child, which Tuppence points out that “if it *had* been her child, she *couldn't* have risked that shot for a minute” (222). In this way she realized that the child was part of the camouflage of motherhood that would protect her true identity from being discovered. This key aspect of the denouement is Christie’s commentary on the false ways society allows motherhood to obscure and stand in for other forms of identity.

Rather than focus on motherhood, *Taken at the Flood* investigates the role of the wife. Besides the intrigue of a husband returned from the dead and the lurking threat of a murderer, the novel focuses on the way the various marriages and romantic relationships of the family at the heart of the text are tested and exposed by the mystery of the novel. For Frances and Jeremy Cloade, their marriage and partnership is brought closer together by the financial and social risks that Gordon Cloade’s death presented. It reveals that

beneath their very reserved relationship is not a financial dependence but love. When Frances asserts that “I married you because I was in love with you, of course” Christie underlines the theme at the heart of the book – the complex nature of romantic ties (33). As the rest of the characters question why Gordon Cloade married Rosaleen and why Rosaleen left her first husband, the thing that is being interrogated and investigated is the nature of love and marriage and how that informs and complicates literal and figurative notions of identity within the text.

Of course, like the various risks and rewards system weighed in consideration of marriage in many of the Westmacotts, the financial threats of the novel are directly tied to the trials each relationship is put through. And while for Frances and Jeremy, the circumstances are something that reveal the love and trust beneath any monetary woes; reality attempts to fracture other relationships. For Lynn and her betrothed Rowley Cloade, the lack of money exposes the changes to their love after a period of separation during the war. Working during the war changed Lynn’s sense of identity; she “was not the same Lynn who went away” and this new sense of independence threatens her reliance on a future with Rowley (40).

However, in the end, despite his near strangulation of her, Lynn finds herself returning to Rowley. This masochistic move in which Lynn reveals that she is attracted to the dangerous and that she “never, really, *cared* very much for being safe-” highlights the self-destructive nature of marriage that Christie deals with elsewhere in the Westmacott novels (220), from John Gabriel burning the cigarette into Isabella’s arm to Celia loving Dermot despite her fear of him as the figure of the Gun Man. Yet, while Rowley no longer appears to be a safe choice for Lynn, compared to her relationship with David, the

true murderer of the text, Rowley is a “better” choice. Christie seems to point to the precarious danger that is potentially present in any relationship. But there is agency in choosing your partner, however unsuitable, and there is a personal and emotional charge to the coupling that society encodes that complicates marriage beyond its typical depictions.

Issues related to that position of wife and also the occurrence of suicide appear reflected in *Towards Zero*. The novel opens with a discussion of the title itself and the concept that detective stories shouldn’t start with the murder but the events that happen years previously “all converging towards a given spot...yes all of them converging towards zero...” (12). This idea of an accumulation of events, of course, applies to the logic and plot and motive of a murder mystery but it also echoes the plots and pacing of Christie’s Westmacott novels - the events of a life or of a marriage adding up and culminating in, for example, Celia’s breakdown and divorce. This approach to some ultimate moment of drama is then repeated in the opening pages of the novel with respect to the aftermath of Angus MacWhirter’s attempted suicide. As he lists the succession of mistakes in his life and the logic that forced him to attempt to jump off a cliff only to be saved, we are reminded of Celia and Christie herself.

Moreover, although he does not reappear in the text until much later, Angus MacWhirter’s role expands to mirror Christie’s emphasis on rebirth in the Westmacott novels. For MacWhirter, one year after his suicide attempt upon returning to the very cliff he jumped off, he is able to not only reflect on his own anger but also save Audrey from a similar fate. This intersection between the two characters reinforces the connection between suicide and divorce that represents the heart of Christie’s trauma. The entire

central murder of the novel is discovered to be an attempt by Audrey's ex-husband Neville to have her framed and hung for murder. This confession that Neville hated Audrey and wants "her to die afraid – to die – to die" and, that Audrey "was always frightened" during the marriage that she ended (211), evokes and gives reality to the fear and paranoia that Celia feels during and after her divorce from Dermot. Although the ending feels dangerously close to a neat happily-ever-after, it is Audrey who asks to go with MacWhirter to South America and Audrey who proposes marriage. Though it is under the guise of being conventional, it is an act of agency within an institution that had previously almost ended her life. For Audrey, like Christie, a second marriage means adventure and a development of self that allows for agency and independence within the concept of "conventionality".

Murder mysteries and detective fiction inherently invite the reader to read for the discovery of identity, and while this is typically tied to the identity of the murder and the solving of the mystery, Christie's fiction offers more to be uncovered and revealed than just a single or couple of criminals. It is by reading through the nature of Christie's autobiography and her Westmacott novels that these alternative points of feminist identity and focalization can be realized. In turn, the collection of these reoccurring themes within Christie's writing as she constantly revises and revisits and reworks her ideas surrounding feminine identity with respect to marriage and motherhood along with the trauma of suicide reinforces my readings of her Westmacott novels.

Of course, Christie herself was the first to separate these two modes of fiction. Although *Murder at the Vicarage* and *Giant's Bread* were published in the same year, they did receive very different reviews and the fact that they were not tied to the same



author mattered. When the *New York Times* reviewed *Giant's Bread* in August 1930, the reviewer was generous: "whoever is concealed beneath the pseudonym of Mary Westmacott may well feel proud of *Giant's Bread*" (56). The novel was treated on its own merits of character building and plot instead of Christie's established reputation as a mystery writer. In contrast, when *Murder at the Vicarage* was reviewed in November of the same year, every piece of fiction Christie had ever written was weighed in the criticism, "The talented Miss Christie is far from being at her best in her latest mystery story" (Bruce BR17). By 1944, the year that first *Towards Zero* and then *Absent in the Spring* were published, a distinct difference in the reviews persist. While *Towards Zero* is claimed as a novel in which "Agatha Christie has surpassed herself" (Isaac BR12), *Absent in the Spring* is just noted as "very readable indeed" (Cook 401). It is, therefore, not only interesting that Christie was producing these works during the same years about very similar topics, but also that genre and her name had a distinct role in how others wrote about her work.

When they do not miss the point altogether, these reviews offer another angle from which to understand the necessity of the crafted authorial persona as divided between "Agatha Christie" and "Mary Westmacott". In order to be a "good" genre writer, she could not be seen switching sides, and to be seen as a "good" woman she could not be revealing her personal struggles with the roles of wife and mother. She writes about writing puzzle mysteries and her dedication to the genre to further establish the portrait of the good woman writer, another red herring that distracts from the obvious facts right under the reader's nose – that these are novels about women and how they understand themselves within their time period. And in doing so she blurs the lines of genre. The

“identity crisis” of the Westmacott novels I noted in the introduction returns here as a way in which Christie subverts and blurs the lines of what it meant to be a celebrated female genre writer and the problems genre presents for the female author.

### **Exiting the Autobiography**

Although the focus of my argument has been consumed by the dissection of Christie’s autobiography and fiction, there is another close source that offers insight into Christie and her role as an author and woman. Coming from a different angle altogether, Max’s memoirs on his life with Christie offer further insight into how she might be seen separate from herself and her own ideologies and fears. In part three of his memoir, he turns his attention fully to a discussion of his wife and her work and in doing so immediately confirms what her autobiography clearly suggests, that “she had a quality of elusiveness...a defensive resistance to inquisitive probing” (Mallowan 195). However, he also acknowledges what she has chosen to reveal through her own autobiographical writing and fiction, hinting that only the “initiated” can know how much of books like *Unfinished Portrait* are true and, more importantly, that “the book is not one of her best because, exceptionally, it is a blend of real people and events with imagination” (195). The veil and criticism he draws over the book betrays a larger commentary on how society appreciates stories about women mediated, hopefully, by a sensitivity for the trauma the book represents for his wife. The summary of her biography that follows in his own words betrays little sentimentality though it was clearly crafted with a generous and fundamental built-in factor of distance between the reader and the subject. However, he does not hesitate to use details from *Unfinished Portrait* interchangeably with other

facts from her life, indicating even that during her the moment of “blank despair, to a loss of memory” during her disappearance, the rest of the story has been told in that novel (201).

Beyond how Max both adheres and diverts from Christie’s own narrative and shaping of her life is how he understood her career. Rather smartly, Max removes himself from the realm of criticism with the disclaimer that “it is hardly becoming for a husband to set himself up as a critic of his wife’s books and this I shall not attempt, neither am I competent to do so, in spite of having read the lot” (206). Instead he offers a series of insights and commentary on some of Christie’s most famous pieces of detective fiction only to find himself also required to mention once again the Westmacott novels, which he deems “of uneven quality, but every one of them is readable” (211). His summarization of each novel’s various themes and the favor he shows for *The Rose and the Yew Tree* -- “for me this one is in the classical vein and will not be destined for oblivion” --appears to seek to protect the anonymity and freedom which Christie expressed herself within the books (210). He finishes this two-page honorable mention with the comment that “it will be a pity if they are forgotten against the popular achievement of the detective fiction. I do not think that they will” (211), a prediction proved false.

What Max does do in aid, I would argue, of Christie’s larger project of fashioning herself as conventional and conservative is highlight her “enunciation of these standards in a period of moral decline” (223). That by not describing the gruesome parts of murders and by focusing instead on “the relentless and fearless pursuit of the wicked,” she is advocating for a philosophy in which “there is no room for any relaxation of moral standards. Evil must be pursued to the end” (223). This branding of Christie as a “moral”

author of detective fiction, as a woman of “high intelligence and integrity, but never claiming to be an intellectual, a woman without ambition who could have shone in many avocations, it was unnecessary for her ever to have been interested in Women’s Lib” reflects Christie’s own desire to be seen as a good woman rather than an exulted author (227). Max and Christie both may find her work inseparable from her identity while also always being sure to make it secondary. As Max concludes in the poem, he wrote for her on her eightieth birthday “You are loved for your kindness your craft and your zest” (229).

Unlike the memoir published by William Godwin revealing the most personal controversial moments of Mary Wollstonecraft’s life, Max carefully preserves the portrait of Christie that she herself established in her own words. It feels appropriately reverent while maintaining a British sense of objectivity. Nonetheless it confirms in its loyalty the nature of the way Christie sought to view herself and her work. The details of her marriage, her divorce, her disappearance are separate from the Agatha Christie who wrote bestselling detective fiction and whose sense of propriety Christie used a shield – obviating her private life from full view from anyone, perhaps Max included. Perhaps in this I am forced to conclude that I was wrong in Chapter Two – perhaps for Christie marriage remains a form of cruel optimism though it might have never felt especially cruel. This second marriage, for all its successes, exhibits what Berlant describes as “a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enable you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to be become different in just the right way” (2). Being married to Max still perpetuated a relationship that allowed for her to attempt to negate the affect authorship complicated her sense of identity. For better or

for worse, Max aides and abets in Christie's own struggle to mediate a world that sought to both minimize her role as author while also market her written work. Perhaps it is only my own relation to the cruel optimism of the idea of marriage that attempts to negate or offer solutions to the way marriage still shapes women's lives years after Christie's own life.

### **Christie 2020**

How we see and read Christie today matters. If she remains a stagnant figure of damehood, of a British Empire long forgotten, then Christie too will become a figure left behind. She might still be read, and her stories will still delight and amuse, but any sense of vitality which her writing and her figure might present will be lost. The mythmaking that persists around the one-dimensional cultural conception of Christie has consequences. Recent blockbuster film adaptations of her novels and continued BBC TV productions maintain interest in Christie and the genre without moving her work and its political implications into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Major productions remain mostly filled with white actors and are treated as re-makes to satisfy a nostalgia for the past instead of a commentary on the interaction between the text of the past and the politics of the present. What these productions should look towards is the innovation sparked by recent revivals of the genre within film such as Rian Johnson's *Knives Out*. By having the threat of deportation as a central motive within the movie paired with both a timely as well as comedic commentary on the current political climate in America in general, *Knives Out* follows in the tradition of using the form of the detective story to deal with a current issue.

Christie's name, however, does not just continue in film adaptations; not only are her books constantly reprinted, new ones come out every year. Written by author Sophie Hannah, these "Agatha Christie Novels" represent the continued legacy of her role within the genre. The style and themes of her stories are something we are still craving today. What we don't have is any author attempting to write more Mary Westmacott novels. Instead we have many women novelists writing about their trauma, writing about the struggle of motherhood and modern-day marriage, of the roles for women that still threaten to consume. Of course these stories and modern publishing still struggle beneath the weight of the gendered implications of genre – whether a novel is considered literary fiction or a romance often depends on gender –but women are freed of some of the constrictions of Christie's time when it comes to the role of the female author. While most people may have never read or even heard of the Mary Westmacott novels, these stories and methods of storytelling are not just part of the larger legacy of her other works of fiction but every other novel about marriage or motherhood to have been written before or since.

From underwriting our modern myths of Christie to paying new consideration to her lesser known works and advocating for their position within a larger history of feminist literature, I have attempted to scratch at the borders that modern Christie scholarship has begun to tear down. There will always be more to do. Janet Morgan concludes in her biography of Christie that "there is, indeed, always more to say" (378) and although she means this in reference to what Christie might have left out of her own autobiography, it feels equally true about any piece of writing that attempts the near impossible task of pinning down an idea about any writer and their writing. In this

Thompson and Morgan finally agree – the Christie left behind in the immense collections of writing and notebooks remains “an elusive shadow, as carefree as a ghost” (Morgan 486) one that every Christie scholar is fated to chase attempting to pin down both the texts and the author remains a final puzzle which both delights and vexes eternally.

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Joan Scudamore is returning from a visit to her daughter in Baghdad when her train is stranded at a rest house in the desert. Without anything to distract, Joan is forced to reflect on her life. She comes to the realization that her husband was in love with a local woman and had always wanted to be a farmer instead of a lawyer and that she had spent her whole life standing in the way of his happiness. Upon finally returning to England and her husband, she decides to return to life as normal instead of apologizing to him or confess her mistakes.

---. *A Daughter's A Daughter*. 1952. HarperCollins, 2017.

Ann Prentice is a widow with a grown daughter named Sarah. While Sarah is away on holiday, Joan falls in love and gets engaged. Her daughter returns and does not like her mother's fiancé and Ann sends him away even though she loves him. When Sarah has to choose between two men and chooses Lawrence Steene who has a reputation for going through wives, Ann does not try and talk her out of it. As Sarah turns to a life of partying and drug addiction with her new husband, Ann remains unfilled as she also keeps a busy social calendar. In the end, Sarah realizes that her mother punished her and let her marry Lawrence as revenge for ending her engagement. Sarah and Ann reconcile as Ann leaves to Canada with the man she loved all along.

---. *Giant's Bread*. 1930. HarperCollins, 2017.

Follows the life of Vernon Deyre and his cousin Joe and childhood friend, Sebastian. After a struggling career in music writing avant-garde operas, Vernon



marries his childhood love Nell and enlists to fight in the First World War. During a battle he is captured and presumed dead. While his wife and family mourn, Vernon recovers in Brussels only to read in the paper that his wife is getting remarried. Distraught he throws himself in front of a truck and wakes up in a fugue state and does not remember his previous life. Chance brings him back to his ancestral home, inherited by his wife upon his death, working as the valet to an army general. Joe and Sebastian recognize him and remind him of his identity. Nell, comfortable with a new very wealthy husband, lies and tells Vernon she is pregnant so she can remain with her other husband. Vernon does not resume his previous identity and instead leaves for Russia with a singer named Jane. On a journey to America to exhibit his new music, the ship wrecks and Vernon saves Nell, who just happens to be aboard with her husband, and lets Jane die. This is his biggest regret but allows him to become a famous composer.

---. *Murder at the Vicarage*. 1930. Bantam Books. 1983.

Colonel Protheroe, widely despised, is found murdered at the Vicar's house. Artist Lawrence Redding turns himself in and then so does Mrs. Anne Protheroe, but neither are believed. As the town circles through suspects, Miss Marple makes her first appearance and uses her knowledge of village life to uncover that the true murderer is not Hawes, who has been framed and poisoned by Redding, but rather Redding and Anne working together to murder her husband.

---. *N or M?* 1941. Berkley Books, 1986.

Set during World War II, Tommy and Tuppence are married with grown children and feel left out of the action of the war. When Tommy is offered a chance to go

undercover to find German spies, Tuppence decides to surprise him by going undercover as well. Infiltrating the guests at a seaside hotel, they uncover the identities of both M and N as a top German spy and his female co-conspirator.

---. *Taken at the Flood*. 1948. Fontana, 1961.

Taking place in post-World War II England, the death of wealthy Gordon Cloade in a bombing sets into motion a fight for his wealth among his relatives who had relied on his financial support. His widow, Rosaleen Cloade, who inherited his fortune is carefully controlled by her brother, David Hunter. When a man named Enoch Arden arrives, it appears that her first husband was never dead and has returned to blackmail her. In reality he is a cousin of the family who Rowley Cloade accidentally then kills in anger at the deception. After Rosaleen dies in her sleep, Poirot discovers that she was not David Hunter's real sister but the housemaid that survived the bombing and that David then used to inherit the fortune.

---. *The Burden*. 1956. HarperCollins, 2017.

Used to being an only child, Laura prays that her newly born sister, Shirley will die; however, when a fire starts in the house, young Laura risks her life to save the baby. After their parents die while traveling, Laura becomes a possessive caretaker and raises Shirley. Shirley marries for love and although her husband is not wise with money and is constantly unfaithful, Laura supports them. When Shirley's husband gets polio, Shirley moves back in with Laura and nurses him. Laura, not wanting to see her sister waste her life as a caretaker, gives him

another dose of sleeping pills when he asks, knowing that the overdose will kill him, and she will not be blamed. After her husband's death, Shirley remarries, and we meet her again on an island through the eyes of a new narrator. Lewellyn Knox is trying to escape his past as a religious prophet when he meets Shirley and he is the one who reports back to Laura that her sister dies and it is unclear if she stepped in front of the lorry on purpose or accidentally while drunk. Lewellyn falls in love with Laura and convinces her to accept her sister's death as payment for Laura's mistakes and that she must move on and live her own life. They then agree to marry.

---. *The Rose and the Yew Tree*. 1948. HarperCollins, 2017.

Narrated by Hugh Norreys, who is confined to a wheelchair after a car accident, the novel follows Hugh's new life with his brother and sister-in-law in a small town and the events of an election for a seat in Parliament. He meets the enigmatic and charming John Gabriel, who the entire family supports in his campaign efforts. Isabella who lives in St. Loo castle and is supposed to marry her cousin Rupert St. Loo; instead, after winning the election, John Gabriel and Isabella run off together but do not marry. Hugh learns at the end of the novel that Isabella died by throwing herself in front of a bullet meant for John Gabriel and that her sacrifice ignited a change in career in which he became known as Father Clement. Hugh, who also loved Isabella, never forgives him for her death.

--. *Towards Zero*. 1944. HarperCollins, 1996.

Featuring Superintendent Battle, this novel starts with the murder of Lady Tressilian while her ward Neville Strange is visiting with his new wife Kay and

his first wife Audrey. Mr. Treves, the family solicitor, also dies from apparent heart failure after walking up the stairs at his hotel. Evidence points to Neville at first, but later Audrey's glove is found with blood on it. When Audrey attempts suicide, another man, Angus MacWhirter stops her. He happens to have been given a jacket from the local cleaners that incriminates Neville who had been trying to frame his ex-wife for murder.

---. *Unfinished Portrait*. 1934. HarperCollins, 2017.

The novel starts with the narrator, Larraby, a man who can no longer paint due to an amputated hand, describing his first meeting with a woman he will call Celia who is about to kill herself. He convinces her to tell her life story instead and the text is his retelling of her story. She begins with her idyllic childhood. She marries a man named Dermot that her mother does not approve of. Although she has a child and writes stories for her own amusement, her relationship with Dermot is strained. After her mother dies, he asks for a divorce. She attempts to kill herself but is fished out of the water. She decides to live in order to raise her daughter but struggles after her daughter marries to make a life for herself. She almost remarries but panics at the last minute and travels the island where Larraby finds her trying to kill herself. She leaves alive and Larraby believes she left to start her life fresh.

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